University of Alberta

Critical Perspectives on Professional Learning Communities

by

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Dedication

To my Mom & Dad, Heather, Emily, Jerry & Shel, Patrick, and Jillian: Thanks to my friends and family for all the love, encouragement, and support through the seeming " in perpetuity" of my studenthood...

To Dr. Rosemary Foster & Dr. Tara Fenwick: thanks for guiding me, and challenging me when I've needed it.

To Jim Parsons: Thanks for "blocking for me." It's been the greatest gift.

To my daughter Carly: Still the first reason I wake up every day wanting to be a better person. Love you

Abstract

Through a series of essays, this work offers a critique of the recently popularized collaborative models of teacher professional development in K-12 schools. Although the focus is on the Professional Learning Community model introduced by Dufour & Eaker (1998), the thesis is intended to provide insight into collaborative practices and their relationship to school improvement more generally. Critical pedagogy and hermeneutic interpretations of collaborative professional development practitioner literature are used to support the binding argument that the PLC model too readily supports neo-liberal ideology and instrumental conceptions of teaching and learning at the expense of more progressive, democratic, and holistic approaches to education. Educators are encouraged to supplement practical foci on pedagogical skill development, curriculum analysis, and assessment practices with critical conversations that situate their work within broader social and political contexts.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Purpose & Objectives of the Research

I first encountered the professional learning community model, popularized by Dufour & Eaker's (1998) Professional Learning Communities, at work as I began working with the Alberta Initiative for School improvement in 2002. While I knew little of the finer points of the model, I quickly became interested in the role it might play in Alberta's school improvement efforts. The model, itself, was not particular powerful; rather, I was intrigued by the momentum that seemed to be gathering around it. For me, the professional learning community resonated, frankly, with faddishness. Was this momentum something to be interpreted with the same cynicism that many teachers respond with when faced with "yet another initiative?"

To dismiss Professional Learning Communities cynically, however, didn't offer much respect for the educators I was meeting who really believed in the promise of the professional learning community model to improve schools. I could only come away from these primordial ponderings asking simply what school improvement initiatives like the PLC mean to the teachers and administrators who work with them. After additional wrestling with theoretical perspectives that would both respect the hope that educators invested in improvement efforts, and maintain a critical or analytical "edge," I emerged with my research question…

> *From a critical hermeneutic perspective, what do Professional Learning Communities mean for teacher professional development and school improvement?*

Current educational literature holds professional learning communities as a hopeful model for K-12 staff development. The purpose of this thesis is to explore deeply the professional learning community model of staff development for public schools. The PLC model seems essentially simple in its intent, and as old as sitting around fires telling hunting and gathering stories. It brings teachers together on a regular basis to discuss and practice effective pedagogy, improve and evaluate student learning, and study curriculum. While "new" to North America, similar collaborative and inquiry-driven models have been used in other countries for years (Abdal-Haqq, 1996; Sykes, 1999). Lesson Study, for example, a collaborative form of lesson planning and practice teaching, is a normal aspect of teacher professional development in Japan (Fernandez, 2002). Furthermore, there is nothing terribly revolutionary in stating that the isolation of teaching should be overcome by advancing teacher collaboration; that student learning is important; or that good teachers can and should improve their practices with research, effective assessment, and ongoing reflection (Dufour & Eaker, 1998).

Thus, despite sometimes elaborate or prophetic claims to the contrary, nothing is so new about PLCs. On the ever-shifting landscape of K-12 schooling, professional learning communities are not the first change model, nor will they be the last. So why say that something is "nothing special," and then proceed to write about it in depth? Is this then to be an act of supreme cynicism, a damning critique, or worse yet a mockery, of fleeting and faddish prescriptions for school improvement? Little is gained by ill-spirited attacks that offer no alternatives. Some of my comments will be critical – particularly of the instrumental emphasis of professional learning communities and their too-easy alignment the standardization movement – but it is critique that I hope will be recognized as having a greater purpose.

It is not difficult to make the case that current school reform initiatives are handmaidens of global neo-liberalism, that schools are being seduced by the "feel good" promise of PLCs. Such arguments may have value from the standpoint of critical analysis, but they are not enough. They do not reach to the heart of daily practice, which ultimately, I believe, will determine the success of collaborative professional development efforts. Policy makers and practitioners are not interested in critiquing capitalism or inciting revolution when they implement a professional development model; they are interested in its immediate, and hopefully positive, impacts on their schools.

My intent is to study the concept as deeply as I can and to make sense of it within the historical and contemporary context in which it exists. This context includes the historical moment, the analytic understandings of language itself, and the resonance of the ideas on the hearts and in the minds of those for whom it is designed – mostly teachers. It is not an understatement to say that some teachers have invested heavily in the idea of PLCs. Recently, teachers I work with in a graduate program at the University of Alberta talked about PLCs in such lofty terms that my colleagues and I christened the conversation "utopic." The point is that these teachers care deeply about their work and their schools; they hope that the philosophy and the activities of PLCs really do make a difference in their lives, and the lives of their students.

Teacher Learning & The Persistence of Hope

In this thesis, I have studied the professional learning community not just for its own sake – although there is value in articulating its strengths, weaknesses and issues – but for what this particular idea can teach us about the more universal and perennial matter of our work as teachers. It is my experience that we teachers engage our work with a long-lasting stubborn hopefulness, because at the core of our actions is our faith that we can change for the good as manifested in our constant tweaking, reflecting, arguing, and sweating to do better, or as Tyack & Cuban so beautifully captured it in the title of their 1995 history of American school reform, our "tinkering toward utopia."

Evidence of these persistent efforts can be found in the staggering number of publications related to school reform, school leadership, school change, and school improvement.. Administrators can supervise staff and curriculum better, create better school cultures, have more supportive relationships with parents and community, and spend money more wisely. Teachers can learn more, work together more effectively, improve classroom management, differentiate instruction, study curriculum, improve school climate, focus more on student achievement, share in school leadership, test better, and engage in more reflective practice. Fullan (2001) reviews American school reform over recent years and concludes that schools are suffering from fragmented, disjointed and voluminous "innovation overload" (p. 21). Sallis (2002) describes "initiative fatigue" (p. 2). When I browse through new publications at K-12 conventions and conferences, I too feel inundated, overwhelmed by how many things it seems we are not doing well enough. I wonder if teachers and administrators feel the same way. Yet energy, vision and hope persist. Why?

As an educational researcher, I pour through books and journals about school improvement, staff professional development, and student achievement. The quantity of literature, much of it speculative or prescriptive, comes in waves, year after year, until the words, ideas, visions and missions and reforms and policies and programs and initiatives are eventually like drops in a great, undifferentiated ocean of theory and practice and practice and theory. Like Solomon (or the wearied teacher), we could lament that all streams run to the sea; there is nothing new under the sun (Ecclesiastes 1:1-11). Education, it seems, is caught up in the paradox of everything and nothing changing; the "contradictory notions" of progress and "deja-vu all over again" jostling for primacy in our psyches (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 40).

Teaching is an exacting vocation. With the exception of the clergy, I know of no other occupation where growth and progress – whether pursued in faith or eschewed in despair – looms so large in one's lifeworld. I know of no other line of work in which improving in perpetuity is so expected, and in which the responsibility for this improvement is assigned and assumed in such deeply personal ways. Today we seem to refer to such instincts in a most dehumanizing way, as "accountability." But, call it what we will, it seems to me that while so much of our school improvement literature tells us "how to," we are all quietly making our meanings in the realm of potentiality, in acts of imagination. Whether it is successful or not, we teachers own change; we feel it fiercely.

Popular professional learning community literature like Lambert's *Leadership Capacity for Lasting School Improvement* (2003), or Dufour & Eaker's *Professional Learning Communities at Work* (1998) provide tasks, charts, tables and labels that press us to work together in the name of student learning, and we do try. Earnestly and with collaborative spirit, we write school missions, tweak timetables, keep records of our activities, refine curriculum, study books, and practice new teaching skills. Some schools report success. Others flounder. Either way, I make the case that these noble activities, on which we expend the bulk of our time and energy in school change efforts, eclipse a subtext of hope, a way of being in our schools that might free us from tyrannous expectation that what works can and should be explainable, and replicable.

This thesis is about professional learning communities. More importantly, it is about change, conviction, persistence, searching, and possibility in our teaching and learning. It is a hermeneutic study, in that I deconstruct the concept of the professional learning community, asking what traditions, what nuances, what beliefs and desires form the context of our understanding. I present the PLC model as a case study, an illustration of how we might push beneath the ceaseless instrumental activity of school reform to read the subtext of hope in our efforts. I ask what we can learn here about what sustains us – not just as teachers, but as searching and intentional human beings.

This is also a critical study, for critical theory and hermeneutics share an interest in the taken for granted (Blacker, 1993). Hope is premised by a notion – if so often poorly understood and shared – that better things are possible. Whether or not we are able to articulate it, we have a normative vision of education. Whether or not we examine it, this vision shapes what we do and how we think. In considering the professional learning community, I critique in the sense of examining potential gaps and unexplored assumptions that may veil deeper understandings of ourselves as educators.

I conclude with an exploration of utopian vision in education, for the fully functioning and productive professional learning community is in essence a small utopia, that promises to fulfill our deepest human needs. As teachers, we enjoy the warmth, support, creativity, and camaraderie of our peers, a sense of purpose and nobility in our work, mastery, artistry, and generativity. Our students find belonging, safety, self-esteem and the full expression of their flowering human potential under our guidance. For all that utopian (and dystopian) expressions are outcast in a postmodern era that eschews anything smacking of a totalizing discourse, the extremes of idealism and cynicism are alive and well in education. These extremes are reminders, perhaps, that as human beings we are irredeemably intentional – we must make meaning. Further we must somehow harmonize our meanings with those meanings made by others. We must acknowledge our hope that we can be whole, our brokenness when this fails, and our spirit in that we are compelled to try again.

Context & Rationale

My interest in professional learning communities grew out of my involvement with the Alberta Initiative for School improvement (AISI), which provides envelope funding for locally planned and executed school improvement projects. My own Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta, along with Alberta's three other university faculties of education, is retained by Alberta Education to provide support to school districts as they research and implement their improvement plans. Many districts and schools have accessed AISI funding to explore and implement PLC models for the ongoing professional development of teaching staff. In most cases, funding has been used to bring in speakers at district PD days, to fund lead teachers in subject area improvement efforts, and to finagle all-important release time required for teachers to collaborate.

Working with AISI on behalf of our Faculty, and interacting with teachers, administrators, district personnel, and our AISI partners, I was struck by the extent to which the professional learning community model had so captured the imagination of Alberta's K-12 educators. My initial response was cynical: I saw naïve faith in a simplistic formula, a blindness on the part of some teachers and administrators to the convenient alignment of the PLC model with the standardized testing that plagues those "in the trenches" like old football injuries on rainy days. But upon reflection, I could not dismiss the hopefulness and sense of commitment that birthed inspired intentions. Even if outcomes were articulated as technē (better mathematics exam questions, improved Grade Three language arts standardized exam outcomes, or better integration of technology in the humanities), when I heard teachers talk there was something more.

The Alberta Initiative for School Improvement

Much of the thinking and data contributing to this study is drawn from the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement or AISI. The Government of Alberta launched the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement in 1999 with the goal of "improv[ing] student learning and performance by fostering initiatives [that] reflect the unique needs and circumstances within school jurisdictions" (Alberta Learning, 1999). The AISI Framework calls for school improvement project proposals that are designed by districts to meet their individual needs. As "an extension of Alberta's accountability framework," AISI funding is contingent upon reports detailing qualitative and quantitative measures of student achievement (Alberta Learning, 1999, p ii).

The policy document also recognizes collaboration as "an essential element for school improvement" (Alberta Learning, 1999, p. ii). Stating a "direct and positive link between improved teaching and improved student learning," (Alberta Learning, 2003a, p. 10), Alberta Learning's School Improvement Branch has, along with other AISI partners, supported extensive teacher and administrator professional development. Naturally this emphasis on improved teaching has led to considerations of effective "capacity building" in Alberta schools alongside and arguably as a prerequisite to effective student learning. Lessons Learned, a review of feedback from AISI coordinators across the province, suggests that AISI has heightened awareness of the need for "intentional, ongoing and systemic PD" (Alberta Learning, 2003b, p.11). Cycle One (2001-2003) saw a considerable amount of professional development take place in team and/or mentorship-based approaches (Alberta Learning, 2004). The trend has continued and strengthened in Cycle Two (2004-2006), with many Alberta school districts allocating AISI funds specifically to the cultivation of professional learning communities.

The actual implementation of learning communities has proven challenging. AISI funding has frequently been used to purchase release time for professional development and collaboration. Many Cycle One reports expressed concern that innovations would cease if funding was lost. Even though many districts are fully supportive of PLC efforts and provide appropriate professional development, individual school administrators have still struggled with the logistics creating the required time for collaboration, and with power dynamics and resistance among staff. Schools and districts also varied widely in their capacities to design, implement and evaluate initiatives in measurable and reportable ways. Like a similarly structured small scale improvement initiative in British Columbia, our experience suggests that graduate level research skills have a bearing on the success of improvement projects that employ action research principles (Raptis & Fleming, 2005). Most challenging, perhaps, is the task of linking the PLC staff development model with the mandated "bottom line" of improved student achievement.

The Accountability Era

As I observed the interest in professional learning communities through AISI, I noted that the model was supported in professional development activities offered by Alberta Education (then Alberta Learning) to support AISI. I wondered why this was the case, so sought out the popular Professional Learning Communities at Work (Dufour & Eaker, 1998) to see what all the fuss was about. I rather quickly found that the authors' no-nonsense focus on student learning was complementary to Alberta Education's allegiance to its own standardized exams, which are mandatory criteria upon which the success of AISI projects is assessed. Critical as I was, I couldn't help but wonder to what extent the PLC model was being advocated, in this context, as a sort of a Trojan horse to cultivate teacher buy-in for the accountability movement. In the guise of affective concepts like collegiality, "mission," and "vision," teachers were being asked to put their heads together to improve student learning. Yet Dufour's & Eaker's concomitant emphasis on data-driven decision making seemed to me to limit the definition of "learning" to what could be measured. In this way, the authors effectively foreclosed on any discussion of what was actually worth learning, leaving a vacuum to be filled by government mandate. This is hardly the stuff of teacher empowerment.

It would be simplistic to attribute enthusiasm for Dufour to some sort of conspiratorial desire on the part of policy makers to "dumb down" teaching, but it is difficult to ignore the broader links between the accountability movement and rising interest in professional learning communities – both movements being international in scope, and at the forefront of current school improvement discourses. They are facets of a school reform movement afoot in Canada, the United States, and England, among other countries (Hargreaves, Earl, Moore & Manning, 2001; Harris, 2002; Lofty, 2004). And, as it is bound up in this reform movement, the professional learning community is inseparable from the social and political contexts within which it operates. Yet in popular press and in-servicing, there is little or no place for scrutiny of these contexts. My motivation for this thesis has been, at least in part, to contribute to more thoughtful conversations about collaborative professional development. Too often, I believe, it is conceived instrumentally, as a mere means to the end of school improvement, so I hope that my efforts lend some additional perspectives that might inform the way we think about and use PLCs and other collaborative professional development models.

Position of the Researcher

A complex task faces the interpretive researcher. There are three potential realities at stake. The first is the question of the extent to which an objective reality is presumed to exist. The second is "reality" as it is presented by a text or a research participant. The third layer is the interpretive stance of the researcher, who must negotiate this web of meanings. Bogden & Biklen (1992) explicate the challenges of delineating an accurate and fair "point of view" given these complex "layers" of reality and interpretation. Thus, a significant contributor to both accuracy and fairness in an interpretive study is a clear positioning of the researcher herself within the research (Packer & Addision, 1989).

With little direct teaching and school experience, I came to know the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement through my work with the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta. Working directly with school districts and their AISI coordinators, as well as with the Alberta government's School Improvement Branch, has provided fruitful opportunities both for points of immersion and engagement in the field, and for places and spaces to step back and reflect, from more theoretical perspectives, upon the meaning of this province-wide school change initiative. In short, I have been blessed to experience both the richness of the "field" – the "real" work of schools and teachers – and the perspective offered by an aerial view of AISI's impact across our province and upon its various stakeholders. While I cannot state that I am fully immersed in the day-to-day workings of schools, I am close enough to these realities and care enough about them to bring what I hope is more than an academic perspective, eventually rendered meaningless by abstract theorizing, to my work.

In my engagement with AISI, I have read, thought and talked much – for some three years now – about professional development in schools generally, and professional learning communities more specifically. A critical thinker always, I have from the beginning found myself asking any question(s) about what is taken for granted and assumed in AISI's embrace of the professional learning community model. My thinking has evolved in my journey toward this thesis, I believe, from the easier path of "critic on high" to more challenging and fundamental questions about what human yearnings are provoked by our collective imaginings about school change and improvement. For this reason, I turned to the theoretical perspectives offered by hermeneutics. I believed that this close study of meaning might address the questions first of why some teachers have invested so heavily in PLCs, and second of how such investments supported or countered teacher collaboration as an accountability mechanism.

I choose, however, to apply a critical "layer" in my interpretive work as well, because it is my conviction that one purpose of my labour as a researcher is to prompt, provoke, and encourage dialogue. Too much in life is taken for granted when we are rendered neither the time nor tools to deconstruct our assumptions, and reconstruct alternatives and even wild possibilities. These imaginings are the stuff of hope and change: in schools, in students, in ourselves. For resting deeply in the critical tradition is an idealism, a normative stance, a sense that there can or should be a "better way."

For some the way is so clear that a stridency or sense of superiority can develop; it becomes too easy to accuse others of "false consciousness," to become so self-certain as to lose the philosophical restlessness that drives us to ask the important questions in the first place. In my encounters with critical pedagogy, I have at times felt discomfort with systems of thought that are critical of intellectual orthodoxies, all the while entrenching their own immovable perspectives and erecting their own theoretical temples.

Thus when I position myself as a critical thinker, it is in the spirit of inquiry, with a perhaps stubborn Hegelian idealism and faith in the ultimate outcome of the dialectical process. Critique for the sake of being critical must eventually drown in cynicism and abstraction. Critique for possibility does not assume all the answers, especially in itself ; it assumes only hope that a thing – that life – can improve, even where the "how" is not apparent.

Thus from this journey to date through thought, literature and personal experience, I arrived at a methodology that I hope is hermeneutic in that it moves to a better understanding of what it means to be a professional learning community, and at the same time critical, in that our awareness, understanding and growth, as professionals and as humans, is informed by our ability to imagine: to say "I wonder…," to ask "What if…"

Methodology & Design

When I entered the realm of continuing professional development for K-12 educators, I found, in my conversations with educators across Alberta, few advocates of professional learning communities who had not been influenced either by Dufour's written work or by his public presentations. Yet when I read the *Professional Learning Communities at Work* (1998), my own wary critical eye garnered a thin, prescriptive rendering that did not address existing school cultures, matrices of differing socioeconomics, ethnicities, micropolitics among staff, wider policy issues, or much otherwise of the tremendous complexity of school change.

I feared, at the time, that *Professional Learning Communities at Work* amounted to a prescription without valuable accompanying advice: Not effective when combined with other medications. Take with food. Do not exceed maximum daily dose. I wondered what sorts of puzzlements and issues might arise when educators put down the school improvement literature and got their hands dirty with the business of creating school mission statements, setting up work teams, and reporting results. But more than anything, I wondered why prescriptive models like Dufour's were so compelling. What about this vision inspired such a sense of the possible? What were the potential gaps between the vision and its reality in implementation?

I wondered about the affective connotations of the words, of the concept. Why – in K-12 education specifically – are learning communities professional? In the contexts of our schools, what does it mean to be a community? What sort of learning is valued in teachers? In students? What is the impact of the centrality of missions, visions, values, planning and collaborating? These were speculative questions, prodding at the ways in which words and concepts shape our hopes and perceptions. I thus chose a hermeneutic framework that would afford close attention to language, and the creative latitude required to synthesize possible answers to these questions. Reading the Professional Learning Community "movement" as a text, I chose to trace the concept as a whole, and to examine its constituent ideas – professionalism, learning and community – through their intellectual ancestry, offering what I hope is useful historical perspective The work, however, requires a grounded sense of what one is actually doing when "doing hermeneutics."

The Methodological Challenges of Hermeneutics

Despite its attention to the minutiae of daily life -- characterized as phronesis (Smith, 1991) or practical wisdom (Gadamer, 1994), hermeneutics is no simple or straightforward approach; it is complex, subtle and contested. Methodologically, hermeneutics is problematic on several grounds. The first problem is that hermeneutics is best described as an “attitude,” and defies or eludes prescriptive or linear approaches to study (Smith, 1993). It is an “anti-method method” of inquiry, or, as Moules (2002) suggests, it is a philosophy, a methodology, the particulars of which must be guided by the question(s) at hand. A second problem is where to “place” the researcher in the research process; interpretive research – in direct opposition to positivistic frameworks – requires the utter subjectivity of the researcher. A third challenge is the evaluation of such research, for an enduring philosophical problem – not just in interpretive research but all research – is the nature of knowledge and its truthfulness. A final and related challenge rests in the personal, particular, and philosophical depth of the interpretive research. Nuanced, “bookish” (Grondin, 1995, p. 36) and intellectually “murky” by its very nature, a hermeneutic approach should concern itself not only with the interpretive process, but also with the extent to which this process can be made meaningful to and for others.

The Problem of Method

The hermeneutic process is inductive, exploratory, and creative. In other words, it is no more possible to offer a step-by-step method for a hermeneutic study than to provide a guaranteed process by which to compose a symphony or sculpt a work of art. The process is intuitive rather than methodological (Gadamer, 1994). Like all creative acts, hermeneutic inquiry is an expansive undertaking. Once limited, delimited or overly defined, it is no longer hermeneutic. The researcher is left with the practical challenge of containing the hermeneutic process within the bounds of a given project, timeframe, or context. Such delimitation begs a deceptively linear and contained representation of the research process, and may leave the researcher (and her fellow participants) at times wandering uncharted territory. This journey may be thrilling, or daunting, or both. And, lacking the cartography of method, it is certainly a difficult journey to recount.

With the caveat that hermeneutics cannot be contained by methodological “rules,” Smith (1991) offers the following characteristics for interpretive study: 1) The researcher should attend carefully to language, philology, and etymology. 2) The researcher must be immersed in the process of interpretation itself. In other words, it is only possible to learn and do; the inquiry process is itself a hermeneutic circle. 3) The hermeneutic imagination revolves around "everydayness;" a respect and attention to the ordinary and taken for granted that are the warp and weft of our realities. 4) The researcher needs to understand that he is engaged in an ultimately creative act. Smith stresses the responsibility of such creation, the purpose of which is "to make proposals about the world we share with the aim of deepening our collective understanding of it" (p. 201). Ellis (1998) emphasizes the importance of journaling and autobiographical writing through the research process, and the iterative nature of our understanding. Hermeneutic inquiry requires the patience to examine and re-examine our forestructures and our evolving perceptions.

Packer and Addison (1989), while noting that such evaluations of interpretive inquiry are still ultimately grounded in assumptions of objectivity, offer four tools for assessing an interpretive account: 1) the requirement that the account be logically coherent; 2) examination of the particular case in relation to external evidence; 3) seeking consensus amongst research stakeholders; and 4) some degree of predictive value in terms of the consequences or future outcomes of the interpretation. Ellis (1998) adds that, while these tools cannot assure "validity" in the positivistic sense, they can "direct attention and discussion" to whether the interpretive inquiry addresses the question at hand in meaningful, helpful ways (p. 30).

The Problem of Researcher Subjectivity

Philosophical hermeneutics establishes understanding as an ultimately subjective process. Research in the positivistic vein sidesteps the problem of the ethical researcher as subject in its assumptions that the "goodness" of the research can be controlled through method. Interpretive research proves far more problematic, for it has no pretence of objectivity to hide behind. The interpretive inquirer cannot avoid the process of reflecting upon himself as the research instrument (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), as the conduit of a particular understanding, as keeper and scribe of lived experience. Thus the nature of researcher subjectivity and its relation to interpretive processes and outcomes is an enduring methodological problem.

Hermeneutics is a method understood only in the doing (Ellis, 1998; Ladkin, 2005; Packer & Addison, 1989; Smith, 1991), and in the doing, the researcher must experience change (hopefully growth) in her understanding of the text. Hence, the practice of hermeneutics must be shared as practice, and the journey of the researcher becomes paramount to the study. The difficulty lies in sharing this journey without becoming trapped in the hermeneutic circle, travelling only an orbit of self-indulgent autobiography that supplants, rather than celebrates the mystery at hand (Ladkin, 2005). Palmer (1998) cautions that subjectivity and relativism can reduce the wonder of what is not yet learned to a cacophony of perspectives yielding no real understanding of the subject at the center of inquiry.

Ladkin (2005) prescribes a consciously pursued balance between attentiveness to the self and curiosity and engagement with the perspectives of others. Ladkin's thinking aligns with what Gadamer believed to be the accountability inherent in the dialogical process: that interpretation is not a thing wrought in the mind of the interpreter alone but through the process of dialogue (Prasad, 2002). In a similar manner, Schwandt (2000) describes an ethic of "closeness…care…proximity or relatedness" as means of guiding the researcher in his relationships with research participants, and Smith (1991) states that one's subjectivity must be "take[n] up with a new sense of responsibility – to make proposals about the world we share with the aim of deepening our collective understanding" (p. 201). In essence, then, there is no "method" by which we can assure that the researcher sees both the strengths and pitfalls of her own subjectivity, and it is up to the researcher to provide arguments, illustrations and interpretations in such a way that a reader has ample material from which to form his own impressions of the work and the positionality of the researcher (Ellis, 1998).

The Problem of Truth

The problem of truth is closely related to the problem of subjectivity, for when philosophical hermeneutics rejects a "world out there" or the possibility of accessing "the way things really are" (Packer & Addision, 1989, p. 280), we are left to ponder whether truth can be found without any claims to objectivity. When the abandonment of objective knowledge legitimizes multiple interpretations of the world, we have a problem determining the value of one interpretation over another. Lacking a desire or criteria to do so leaves us dwelling in that house of mirrors called relativism, a charge commonly levelled against philosophical hermeneutics (Prasad, 2002).

There are at least two problems with the relativistic notion that all interpretations are valid. The first is that such relativism can only end in nihilism (Gadamer, 1994; Schwandt, 2000). Perhaps it is the shadow of this bleak alternative to truth that keeps us longing for some sort of metaphysical certainty. Despite the ubiquity of postmodern and poststructural perspectives in present academia, our desire to seek truth has not gone gently into that good night, and indeed it may be argued that all the roads of our pluralism and perspectivism are still leading to same sort of normative home: a hope that some good can come what is learned. Otherwise, why do the work? States McLennan (1992), "without some universal concepts, without some attempt to see the social world as an evolving totality, without some aspiration to better humanity through improving knowledge, I see no purpose whatever in doing social science at all" (p. 351).

A second and more practical problem is that of generalizability, a hallmark of positivistic thinking that some suggest is perhaps too quickly eschewed by interpretivists. Lagemann and Shulman (1999), observing a growing trend in educational research toward more nuanced, situational and specific interpretive inquiries, wonder whether, as a consequence, we might "lose all basis for generalization" (p. xvii). Attention to context and the dialogical nature of understanding are likely to have applicability for the given time, place and participants, but may lack transferability to other situations or to broader contexts like program and policy creation, assessment and change. Note Swann and Pratt (1999), "the relationship between knowledge production and knowledge use is problematical" (p. 5).

The researcher's way out may only be an appeal to realism. Swann & Pratt (1999) describe realism as the belief that the world "exists independently of our knowledge of it," coupled with the conviction that knowledge is "a human construct…fallible for logical as well as social reasons" (p. 7). Schwandt (2000) refers to this coupling as "weak holism" or the belief that while no grounds for determining the truth of one interpretation over another can be theoretically justified, it is nonetheless desirable to seek reasonable and rational means of judging the validity of an interpretation.

Here truth – although relative – takes on an accountability of sorts. Schwandt (2000) explains Gadamer's position that "although the act of understanding cannot be modeled as a determinate analysis … nonetheless [it] has a normative dimension [as] a kind of practical-moral knowledge" (p. 211). First, we consider truth as faithful representation of the situation at hand. Second, we assess the catalytic validity of the work – the extent to which it addresses the situational needs and prompts appropriate/helpful change (Packer & Addison, 1989).

The Problem of Application:

Because of its complexity, a hermeneutic approach can, I believe, easily slide into obscurantism. Thus the researcher should concern himself not only with the interpretive process, but also with the extent to which this process can be made meaningful to and for others. When Lagemann & Shulman (1999) note that the quality of interpretive research is questionable on the basis of questionable training, we might ask whether acts of responsibly interpreting and representing should require such training, or whether the evaluation of interpretive research then becomes the task of a privileged few. Prasad (2002) challenges the usefulness and applicability of hermeneutics to organizational inquiry, and Fraser (1995) notes the frequent perception that research in the social sciences lacks relevance for practical problem solving.

I would argue that there is a fundamental irony to phenomenology and its related field of philosophical hermeneutics. A discourse that concerns itself with understanding in the everydayness of the lifeworld may become, in its spiralling reflexivity, too far removed from that same everydayness to live up to its own dialogical and democratic claims. Where hermeneutics is applied as a mode of research, its theoretical obscurity has the potential precisely to cut it off from effectively communicating lived experience.

It is unlikely that this dilemma can be resolved, and perhaps it is not necessary to resolve it. However, it should call to the researcher's attention that "understanding must be made understandable." The gifts of critical educator Paulo Freire, poet Robert Frost, or culture critic Neil Postman lie in their rendering of rich understandings in ways that are accessible and invite further conversation among the many, rather than among a few who have mastered the canon of complex theory and can be deemed "in the know."

Overcoming Objective/Subjective Polarity:

Bringing critical theory to bear on an interpretive work is a thorny matter, for critical perspectives can be shown to share foundational assumptions with both with positivism and interpretivism. With positivism, critical theory shares a normative dimension, hence a claim to some sort of objective knowing. Despite an assertion that critical theory has moved to a poststructuralist admission of plurality (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000), this plurality is ultimately subject to a normative vision of social justice and democracy. Critical theory also shares with positivism some notion that reality can be determined and categorized. Kincheloe and McLaren (2000) attempt to soften the determinism of race, gender and particularly class categories in critical theory, yet the critical mind, like that of its positivistic fellow, remains ill at ease with the ambiguity of the social world. There persists, in the words of Smith (1991), a desire to "put interpretation to rest" – to achieve some sort of stable and enduring agreement about what constitutes truth.

Yet in its effort to lay bare ideology, critical theory partakes of the hermeneutic tradition in its scrutiny of the ordinary and taken-for-granted, calling forth the assumptions, traditions and discourses that weave their threads into the fabric of our everyday being (Moules, 2002). In this sense, hermeneutics shares with the critical tradition an imperative to pause and wonder about those facets of life that hover beneath our conscious consideration. Smith (1991) observes that a growing space for hermeneutics in social science research may be attributed to the failure of traditional, positivistic approaches to the "crisis of value" wrought by late modernity (p. 188). Hence hermeneutics, in a critical sense, may be understood as a tool for deep exploration of the ways in which norms and values are constructed, reified, and institutionalized.

If we then return to our basic problem of the objective/subjective polarity, critical hermeneutics appears to have elements of both – potentially confusing business. Realism, however, abandons this polarity as ultimately unproductive (Fraser, 1995; Ladkin, 2005; Swann & Pratt, 1999). "Critical dialectics" in social sciences, argues Morrow (1994), addresses both the tendency in purely interpretive accounts to overlook questions of power, and positivism's neglect of metatheoretical questions that challenge the supremacy of objectivity (p. 59). In other words, these theoretical perspectives seek a middle road that permits both "a world out there" – albeit ultimately unknowable – and the creativity and multiplicity of all of our persistent, potentially wrong, and stubbornly hopeful attempts to come to know it.

Advantages of Critical Hermeneutics

While not without its own complications – which shall be considered yet – critical hermeneutics addresses some difficulties inherent in philosophical hermeneutics. First, critical hermeneutics recognizes that the dialogical method presumes an ideal speech situation, and as a result sidesteps the problem of power. While Gadamer believed that we could never step outside of language and history to create an ideal speech situation (Brown & Jones, 2001), the dialogical nature of hermeneutic research (Packer & Addison, 1989) seems to presume this very ideal. Hence it does not address the possibility that the codetermination of meaning is not always as egalitarian and democratic as we might hope, and may be plagued by distortions or imbalances in the relationship between researcher and participants. Habermas' critical hermeneutics seeks redress and transcendence of these problems (Brown & Jones, 2001; Prasad, 2002).

Second, when we have permitted the possibility of ideological distortion, critical perspectives can serve as a tool for the researcher, for despite the best efforts or intentions of the researcher and participants, inequalities and misunderstandings must be expected to emerge. Godon (2004) points out that, although an awareness of pre-understandings is essential for the dialogical researcher, many of these pre-understandings remain unconscious. This is not cause to abandon the pursuit of critical self-consciousness; it should, however, serve as a source of healthy scepticism, restraint and reflexivity in the researcher. This echoes Gadamer's distinction between productive and unproductive prejudice (Prasad, 2002). Critical theory may provide value in that it calls upon the researcher to bring critical awareness not only to the potential operation of ideology in research participants, but also to her own positionality (Smith, 1991). Critical subjectivity requires the researcher to be conscious of her own "particular frames of reference…or habitual reactions to persons or events" (Ladkin, 2005).

Finally, critical hermeneutics recognizes that hermeneutic activity – the researcher's subjective undertakings – does not occur in a bubble. The research process takes place in a social and political world wherein competing interests may shape the researcher and research agenda. For example, Casey (1996) argues that discourse in educational practice and practitioner learning has remained steadfastedly instrumental and unreflective. In our interpretive accounts of this field, we stand a better chance of moving beyond the dominance of scientism when we name it and challenge it as a normative discourse. To emphasize only the immediate relational aspects of interpretive activity may mean attending too little to wider discourses of politics, bureaucracy and hegemony. In other words, critical hermeneutics invites us to read the research process itself as a text. To generate new perspectives requires an awareness of the contextual metaphors within which research community is already working (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000).

Disadvantages of Critical Hermeneutics

As is the case with philosophical hermeneutics, more critical perspectives run the risk of descending into solipsism, and we are left to depend on the will of the researcher and the transparency of her hermeneutic journey to determine whether she has engaged it openly and reflexively, or succumbed to a sometimes tendency in interpretation to "slide into tendentious opinions and pronouncements" (Packer & Addison, 1989). The risk is especially great in critical hermeneutics with its normative assumptions. Critical theory can all too easily slip into its own dogmatic determinism or an arrogance of "knowing better" than one's research participants. Thus a critical emancipatory framework is not always suited to honouring participants' perspectives, and may not be a productive mode of inquiry where challenges to the status quo have the potential to be disruptive or damaging by imposing one's own ideologies on participants' contributions.

Conclusion

As a discussion only of methodological considerations, this work does not at all reflect the entirety of my learning journey, either on the topic of teacher professional development, or the field of hermeneutics as an area of study in its own right. I came to my problem – what about PLCs "makes teachers tick" – with a conflict of my own: How was I to explore what I perceived to be a lack of critical awareness around the subject of professional learning communities without doing violence to the hopes and beliefs of those educators already immersed in this professional development practice? Essentially, this section of my thesis represents my attempts to sort through this dilemma in the construction of a critical hermeneutic methodology.

We need critical perspectives because there is such a tendency in school improvement literature to, on the one hand, recognize that schools are negatively impacted by broader forces like neo-liberalism and consumerism, while on the other hand failing to recognize that the reform efforts called for are equally plagued by and often embedded in these very same forces. In schools and societies that are increasingly diverse and increasingly recognized as such, critical perspectives on education – with their emphases on power differentials, justice and democracy – can and should inform our efforts to educate. Notes Smith (1993), "[I]n a time when the very act of thinking has become a target of intense commercial and political manipulation, the need is great for persons who can meaningfully deconstruct what is going on and propose alternative, more creative ways of thinking and acting" (p. 199). Smith seems to be suggesting that it is not enough to be interpretive; we require a critical edge as well.

Yet critical perspectives must not descend into cynicism either. This cynicism – and an analytical sort of detachment that still constitutes the bulk of what is valued in educational research – threatens to rob the work of its moral and spiritual dimensions. This is something I believe that Gadamer recognizes when he challenges the nature of "truth" in the positivistic tradition. In this reading of the professional learning community, to date I have discovered – with deepening subtlety – the ways in which the analytic attitude can, in fact, come to impede the task of one who studies text in a hermeneutic way. There is a balance to be achieved between grounding oneself in the "facts" of the field – its key authors, its traditions, its history – and removing oneself from the coherence of this portrait enough to allow the play of the hermeneutic circle. Without "letting go" of the rope of reason, it is easy to see where the human sciences can cease to be human at all – where the fundamental meanings derived, the spiritual dimensions of applying and living what we come to know as "truth" become lost in a litany of facts, citations, and arguments. Knowing, or what is worth knowing, perhaps, must become what we know in the poetic sense.

Outline of Inquiry

This study is designed to excavate the potential meanings bound up in the phrase "professional learning community." The premise behind this hermeneutic activity is my belief that we have failed to appreciate or fully explore the affective connotations of these powerful and widely used words. While both concept and practice are cynically dismissed by many, so too have my colleagues and I seen, through our work with the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement, deep personal investments in the same.

The burning question is why an organizational initiative can so intensely provoke its participants. The professional learning community is – as this work shall demonstrate – not a particularly new idea; many "have the t-shirt," or for long time teachers, a collection of them from past school reform efforts. Rather, the PLC is explored in depth not only in and of itself, but with an eye on what can be learned about professional development, meaningful work, personal efficacy, and hope.

Chapter Two outlines the concept as it is presented and treated within school professional development literature. I then attempt to move beyond education literature to trace the origin of the K-12 professional learning community back to its roots in organizational behaviour and systems thinking. Curriculum theorist Herbert Kliebard (2000) warned often of the hazards of the ahistoricism that characterizes school reform efforts and, from our experiences, the professional learning community is a case in point. Reformers willing to examine the foundations of the PLC might first be surprised to see that the concept is not terribly "new." More importantly, historical perspectives might hasten the journey toward critical scrutiny when we are forced to ask: If these ideas have been around for some time, why have they failed to take hold in our schools? Perhaps the answer(s) would yield more wisdom about hopes and challenges bound up in PLCs than glib inspirational seminars.

Chapter 3 is a close study of the "professional" in the professional learning community. I came to this topic because I wondered about the constitutive elements of the phrase "professional learning community," and in turn then wondered whether – or in what ways – participation in a PLC might shape teachers' perceptions of their own professionalism. In this essay, I discuss the history of professionalism in general, and then look at the longstanding problem of establishing teaching as a legitimate profession. Present day impacts on professional work are considered – in particular the institutionalization of professionals; the challenges of learning and applying exponentially growing bodies of knowledge; and the constraints of instrumentalism and accountability on moral and reflective practice. By positioning professionalism – both generally and for teachers in particular – historically and presently, I arrive at a number of potential meanings or interpretations of what might constitute "professionalism" in the professional learning community.

Chapter Four of this work is an essay that explores learning in PLCs from the perspective of transformative learning theory. In this chapter I describe what I have seen as an excessively instrumental work focus in professional learning communities, and propose that this focus is insufficient to sustain a professional learning community. I then review Mezirow's transformative learning theory and apply it to the work of PLCs. I suggest that transformative learning theory can be used to help us understand why professional learning communities are so difficult to implement, and to help teachers to examine the beliefs, values and assumptions that may be impeding their collaborative efforts.

In Chapter Five, I return to the question of hope. Here, I interpret school improvement literature related to collaborative professional development models as instances of utopian dreaming, and consider how this shapes teachers' sense-making of professional learning communities. Using Halpin's (2003) *Hope and Education* as a starting point, I look at some ways in which utopian thinking may either mask the ideology underlying school improvement or, as Halpin proposes, be used as a means to restore hope to public education. This chapter concludes with my thoughts on the relationship between critical pedagogy and hope in teacher professional development.

These chapters, written for the most part in the sequence in which they are presented, reflect some of the evolution in my own thinking. Much of this evolution has been a deepening understanding of what it means to apply critical theory to the work of schools. This work also reflects my growing conviction that an appropriate balance between student-focused professional skill development, reflective practice, and critical pedagogy must be in place for PLCs – or any other school improvement initiatives for that matter – to *have a lasting, positive, and significant* impact on the ways in which students and teachers alike experience our public schools.

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Chapter Two: Professional Learning Communities in Perspective

The concept of a "professional learning community," perhaps most ubiquitously understood at present within the framework proposed by Richard Dufour and Robert Eaker (1998), has captured the collective imagination of North American educators with its promise of fundamentally altering teaching, learning, and the generally stifling bureaucracy and individualism that pervades most schools. In Alberta, many current AISI projects explicate plans to develop professional learning communities in individual schools and/or across districts. While the implementation and maturation of PLCs is fraught with complexities and challenges, there is agreement that a strong and purposeful community is critical to school effectiveness. Sergiovanni (2000) is representative when he states, "developing a community of practice may be the single most important way to improve a school" (p. 139).

Defining the PLC

While each word in the phrase "professional learning community" could be the subject of endless hermeneutic scrutiny, there also seems reasonable consensus in the field about what the words mean as a whole. A number of key concepts are consistently present in dialogue about PLCs. One is that the development of a professional learning community requires a fundamental reculturing of schools (Hawley& Valli, 1999; Zmuda, Kuklis & Kline, 2004). The traditional independence and isolation of teachers must be replaced by collaboration and collegiality. Teachers must come to view themselves as part of the school's collective greater cause, rather than as "lone wolves." Hierarchical leadership styles and bureaucracies must be replaced by more distributed and egalitarian forms of leadership (Leonard & Leonard, 1999; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Mitchell and Sackney (2001) position learning communities within a larger paradigmatic shift in our worldview from that of mechanistic to holistic or "ecological" (p. 5); learning communities thus emphasize interdependent relationships (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996).

Such interdependence can only work effectively if attitudes, beliefs and actions are coordinated around a shared vision and commitment (Huffman, 2001). There is general agreement that learning communities are bound by a common goal or vision to improve the experiences and successes of students in schools (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996; Louis, Marks & Kruse, 1996; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; Sergiovanni, 2000). The philosophies behind such an orientation are not always uniform. More pragmatic works like those of Dufour and Eaker (1998) or Schmoker (1993) lend themselves well to improvement efforts strongly tied to public accountability whereas others – Thomas Sergiovanni (1994) or Nel Noddings (2005) for example – place more emphasis on humanistic motivations. Regardless, and in keeping with the notion of a common, binding purpose or morality, learning communities are ultimately successful when they result in student success, however that is to be defined in a given context.

A focus on student success requires that PLCs be highly intentional and inquiry-based. PLCs are results-oriented. Employing many of the principles of action research, teachers are asked to evaluate existing conditions and practices, research alternatives, and apply findings to continuously improving teaching (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Sykes, 1999; Zmuda, Kuklis & Kline, 2004). Joyce and Showers (2000) emphasize that school staff must engage existing research on effective practices, noting that the most effective of change processes is moot if the content or direction of that change is not carefully selected and well-understood in theory. Teachers, they argue, are less likely to embed an effective practice if they lack knowledge of the theory and philosophy behind it. Thus PLCs require, both in their processes and content, that teachers become continuous, self-conscious and self-directed learners (Cibulka & Nakayama, 2000). The cultivation of a professional learning community is believed to enhance staff's sense – both individually and collectively – that they are responsible for student learning (Weller & Weller, 1997).

Many add that the professional learning community has a strong affective dynamic; simply put, the work of continuous improvement must be complemented and supported by warm collegial relationships (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). If, as Sergiovanni (2000) suggests, the lifeworld of relationship should drive the success-oriented activities of the systemworld, then interpersonal bonds among staff must be in place for the task work of school improvement to be effective. Citing an extensive study of positive staff relationships in five English primary schools, Fullan and Hargreaves touch on a similar vein when they talk about "the gestures, jokes and glances that signal sympathy and understanding….birthdays, treat days and other little ceremonial celebrations…[and] the acceptance and intermixture of personal lives with professional ones" (1996, p. 48). While these authors and others (Achinstein, 2002; Little, 1990) also warn that good close relationships do not automatically translate to learning communities that improve schools, it is clear that they are an essential ingredient.

Stated Benefits of the PLC

Professional learning communities are proposed as alternatives to what many have concluded to be ineffective traditional professional development strategies. A common critique of professional development is that it typically does not translate into significant changes/improvements in classroom practices (Guskey, 2000; Hawley & Valli, 1999; Joyce & Showers, 2000). Without follow up, practice, and opportunities to reflect, new materials and innovations become "furniture:" untouched binders on bookshelves, resource kits and displays forgotten in storage rooms. Beyond the level of the individual classroom, Zmuda, Kuklis and Kline (2004) argue that, while many individual educators are committed to their own professional growth, their efforts are too fragmented and inconsistent to yield any significant changes in the larger school community. Cibulka and Nakayama (2000) believe that most PD (professional development) is chosen for teachers, and does not foster their skills as self-directed learners. These "top down" directives do not employ known principles of adult learning (Gordon, 2004), nor do they cultivate a sense of ownership or "buy in" from participants. In fact, teachers may tune out or burn out when bombarded, year in and year out with change initiatives (Fullan, 2001).

Given an, by all accounts, entrenched system of poor professional development practices, why are alternatives emerging now? Are there contextual variables contributing to their rise? One is that many authors have noted a crisis in morale in the teaching profession, resulting in high teacher attrition rates (Bushnell, 2003; Hargreaves, 2003; Olivier, 2001). This can only lead to a crisis in school leadership, as fewer and fewer committed and experienced teachers are available to fill often-thankless administrative positions. Thus, calls for more distributive forms of leadership like those found in professional learning communities may be premised not only on the philosophical appeal of more democratic and egalitarian forms of leadership, but also on the need to address the practical problem of a dearth of effective leadership within traditional hierarchical models. Further, a recognition that continuous learning and adaptability are increasing required for labour market success (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Hargreaves, 2003) and the acceptance of constructivism as a learning theory (Lambert, 2003; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000) means that didactic dissemination of a fixed body of knowledge can no longer be the norm – either in student or teacher learning. As students are called upon to be active, inquiring agents in their own learning, professional development for teachers must inculcate the same skills.

Case studies of professional learning communities and similar collaborative professional development models suggest that they are a superior alternative to traditional teacher professional development fair: a feasible and helpful means of furthering teacher learning, and in turn student learning (Roberts & Dungan, 1993; Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell & Valentine, 1999). First, they model the sort of learning that teachers believe to be most effective for students. Teachers are asked to gather and examine evidence, reflect critically on their environment and teaching habits, inquire into educational problems, and work together to find solutions. These are the sorts of skills lauded for the new knowledge worker, and it is felt to be paramount that these learning skills are cultivated to prepare students for a knowledge-driven labour market and an increasingly complex society (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Hargreaves, 2003). Teacher learning and student learning are closely connected (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996; Gordon, 2004); thus by practicing inquiry-oriented skills in their professional development activities, teachers are more likely to apply the same pedagogical strategies with their students, and to model these skills effectively (Cibulka & Nakayama, 2000).

Second, collaborative professional development provides opportunities for teachers to work together to develop common resources and assessments, as well as common priorities and understandings concerning curriculum. This constructivist approach to curriculum development and understanding cultivates a sense of ownership and empowerment (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000) and, under the right conditions, may counter the mandated use of "teacher proof" curriculum (Bushnell, 2003). If it is as simple as "two heads are better than one," teachers' collective efforts should generate superior teaching tools and practices. Applied in a more standardized manner across a district or school may be argued to provide students with more equitable classroom experiences and opportunities. Further, collective planning and lesson development helps to address the practical problem of overwhelming time pressure as teachers share proven resources and strategies instead of "reinventing the wheel" within their own classrooms.

Third, professional learning communities may be a source of morale for those who have felt isolated and alone in their teaching. In many Alberta Initiative for School Improvement projects, experiences with PLCs are uplifting teachers through collegiality, and the sense of belonging that comes when a school shares a common language, culture or vision (Taylor, Servage, McRae & Parsons, 2006). A trusting collaborative environment motivates school staff, encourages reflective practice, and makes the risk-taking required for innovation less threatening (Hargreaves, 2003; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). The theme of greater willingness to take risks was also pervasive in AISI reports on PLCs (Taylor et. al., 2006).

Fourth, collaborative professional development generates what is perhaps a "kinder and gentler" accountability: individual practices are subject to the scrutiny and reflection of a group; teachers cannot close their doors and do what they will. Yet, in the mature professional learning community, the sorts of threats that cause teachers to retreat behind closed doors have been overcome. Practices are evaluated and honed in a supportive climate. Challenges and disagreements are constructive, and diverse perspectives are honoured (Lambert, 2003). For Little (1990), effective collaboration means that a safe affective climate supports rather than takes the place of conversations that must fundamentally focus on improved teaching practice. "[P]rofessional autonomy and discretion reside collectively with the faculty; put more forcefully, each one's teaching is everyone's business, and each one's success is everyone's responsibility" (Joint Work subheading, ¶9).

Critiques of Collaborative Learning Models

The rationale for collaborative professional development is, on the surface, enormously compelling. Yet, like the score for a symphony, complexities and challenges are only fully appreciated and understood in the throes of performance. And, school staff, like an orchestra, are unlikely to coordinate and perform successfully without considerable practice.

Existing critiques of the professional learning community fall into two general categories. The first concerns the feasibility of the PLC. Authors point to various barriers to achieving the ideal of a sustainable learning community, and its kindred goal of organizational leadership capacity. Critics note both the functions and dysfunctions of resistance, the complexities, power struggles and politics that make difficult work of effective communication, and the absence of resources required to sustain initiatives. The second category is more critical, asking in what ways the professional learning community may be used to perpetuate the nagging plague of the industrial metaphor in education. This latter critique has received some attention in scholarly literature, but is virtually absent in the professional development literature accessed by school and district level practitioners.

Barriers to Successful Implementation

As experiences with PLCs – both positive and negative – have grown, so too has the breadth of discussion on the dynamics and challenges of successful implementation. Numerous barriers have been noted. Among the most obvious is the time required to enact major change. Lack of time is consistently reported as a major barrier to effective professional development (Abdal-Haqq, 1996). Our own experiences with AISI bear this out. Alberta Education's (2006) review of professional learning communities, a project in which I acted as a researcher, revealed that principals struggle with "creative scheduling," trying to cover off classes so that teachers have time to work together. A significant portion of AISI envelope funding is used to purchase release time for teachers. Many projects have noted that, without these additional funds, the release time simply would not happen. Other projects have been forced to slow down ambitious initiatives, recognizing that allotted planning time did not afford the scope of change sought (Taylor, et. al., 2006).

Given such poverty of time, Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) provide a pointed example of the sorts of conditions under which teachers may be expected to collaborate:

> Preparation time periods were usually fairly short – 40 minutes or less. Many minutes were often lost looking after classes until the covering teacher arrived, taking children to the gym and supervising them to get changed, walking across to the staffroom if the teacher's own classroom was in use, and so on. This time was commonly regarded as too short for sustained planning, be it collective or individual. (p. 60).

Most teachers would utter a sigh of recognition at this example of small daily hassles that interfere with the time and space required to tackle any in-depth or creative thinking. Yet, often, expectations of the quality of work that a PLC will generate appear to be premised on unrealistic perceptions of what can be accomplished in such small and fragmented working periods. The "messiness" illustrated by the authors above suggests that what looks good and efficient in the plan or schedule on paper may not, in practice, be feasible. Without adequate, regular, embedded time to collaborate, any PLC successes will be limited to isolated cases, and/or be unsustainable.

A further critique of professional learning community models is their absolute dependence on school-wide "buy in." A positive, trusting and collegial climate is considered critical to collaborative professional development, but this ideal standard can be very difficult to obtain in practice. Administrators may be tempted to implement PLCs as a new initiative, only to find their efforts dampened by cynicism, resistance or indifference. In this sense, professional learning community literature has not, to date, overcome the perception of the PLC model as "just another fad." The hazard of prescriptive and (I would argue) somewhat over-simplified models like those presented in Eaker and Dufour (1998), Lambert (2003), or Zmuda, Kuklis and Kline (2004) – all popular inservice resources for collaborative school improvement – rests in the illusions they inadvertently create. Despite stated caveats in these works that change is a long-term process, from accompanying checklists, charts, staff quizzes and step-buy-steps resonates a reassuring message that staff resistance is a relatively simple problem to overcome. Professional literature (Achinstein, 2002; Leonard & Leonard, 1999; Rusch, 2005) and our experiences with AISI (Taylor et. al. 2006) certainly confirm the challenge of "buy in," yet it is noted as essential to successful school-wide collaboration.

Why is this "buy in" so difficult to achieve? Neglected in much of the popular literature is a frank examination of the power and nature of micro-politics in schools. Theories of distributed and egalitarian forms of leadership – those required for collaborative learning – fail to take into account the reality that leadership roles are differently recognized through status, rewards, remunerations, and accountabilities (Harris, 2003). These contextual factors create power differentials, reintroduce the idea of hierarchy, and bring with them a host of organizational complexities. These may take the form of small, competing pockets of power. Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) describe the "balkanization" that occurs when staff members define themselves and set goals only within the immediate contexts of their own departments.

Harris (2003) too notes that schools may be divided along subject and grade levels, making free-flowing distributed leadership difficult. Similar dynamics have occurred when staff have been broken into teams, resulting in a "spirit of disabling competitiveness" between teams, and a tendency to identify with team goals and interests over those best for the school as a whole (Leonard & Leonard, 1999, p. 240.) More often than not, staff, and in turn the school and its students, lack a common and unifying culture – especially one that focuses specifically on student learning – and the larger and more complex the school, the harder such unity is to achieve.

In some schools, such "small-p politics" may be fairly stable, at least unobtrusive, and at best even somewhat positive and functional. The result is an innocuous or even pleasant school climate. However, the potential for problems remains even where consensus is apparent. Staff members may enjoy a positive climate that is mistaken for collegiality. For Little (1990), true collaboration or "joint work" exists only once teachers have cultivated interdependence in their professional activities (Strong & Weak Ties Among Teachers subheading, ¶2). Woll (1984) suggests that conditions of strong agreement foster the potential for excessive control by leadership. Whether through the charisma of an individual, the lull of ideology, or the comfort of complacency, static cultures discourage change when it is called for.

Further, in some cases, stable cultures may be held together by a collective and unstated fear that any significant challenge to the status quo will irreparably damage relationships. In such cases, a spirit of collegiality may be perceived, but is likely founded on surface consent that cannot withstand healthy dissent (Achinstein 2002; Little, 1990; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). Staff may offer one another emotional support and share some resources, but choices of teaching strategies and practices remain autonomous, and little professional discourse takes place (Little, 1990).

Professional learning community models may also underestimate the power of contextual variables beyond the school walls. Authors like Dufour and Eaker (1998) and Lambert (2003) imply that the power of change rests within the school, yet seem to make globalized assumptions about possibilities for other schools based on a limited number of case studies. It is tempting to draw wider prescriptives from successful cases and the empowering energy they generate. And, while the advice is sound, it may fail to appropriately delimit what can be achieved. Largely uniform applications of an improvement model can fail to take into account the different demands and barriers posed by schools of differing socio-economic characteristics (Harris, 2002).

Mitchell and Sackney (2000) caution that new initiatives may not be understood or appreciated by the wider community, including parents. A goodly portion of public sentiment is (perhaps rightfully so) suspicious of school change and student-centered learning after years of faddish initiatives, and many may cling to tradition and a "back to basics" mentality (Darling-Hammond, 1997). Fink's (2000) longitudinal study of the pinnacle and decline of an Ontario high school through changing leadership and political tides suggests that some important conditions for school effectiveness are beyond the control of the school's staff. Bottery (2003) argues that current PLC literature fails to take into account broader contextual forces that create a climate of suspicion and unhappiness in schools. Where education policies are premised on a profound mistrust of teacher professionalism, argues Bottery, it is unlikely that teachers in turn will be able to work in trusting relationships with one another.

Critical Perspectives: Collaborative Learning and the Same Old Ideologies?

The purpose of critical discourse is not to undermine or dismiss popular ideas like collaborative professional development models, but to probe more deeply at the assumptions that underlie them, and ask about their eventual consequences. Perhaps more than any other theoretical perspective, critical theory is unapologetically normative in its thrust, envisioning social institutions and practices that promote democracy, freedom from oppressive ideologies, and social justice (Biesta, 1998). Thus critical perspectives examine public education for the extent to which it furthers these ends. Unfortunately, schools are often found to be sorely lacking, regarded instead as bastions of bureaucracy, Taylorism (factory model thinking) and scientism (Eisner, 1985; Kliebard, 2000; Leonard & Leonard, 2001) that promote education only in its narrowest sense – preparation for the workplace, and conformity to prevailing ideologies (Bottery, 2003; O'Sullivan, 2001).

Assuming these charges have some validity, challenges from a critical perspective take the form of asking whether the professional learning community represents any significant shift away from the limited and limiting beliefs and practices that presently govern the content and processes of public education. The essential argument here is that the professional learning community model – and other collaborative professional development models – simply place a more collegial spin on professional development that continues to reinforce biases toward instrumentalism, standardization and conformity in education (Bottery, 2003). For example, there is a great deal of common sense appeal in Dufour's essential question of what we want students to be able to know and do (1998, p. 151), yet such questions – especially when asked in a context of accountability and high-stakes testing – may have the effect of reducing complex curricular questions to a checklist of tasks.

Focused on data instead of discourse and in the absence of any dissent, a by-most-measures (irony noted) successful professional learning community can lack a critical voice. Caught up in what are still largely instrumental tasks of mapping curriculum, developing assessment rubrics, and coaching one another on effective pedagogical strategies, teachers may be reduced to "worker bees" (Hargreaves, Earl, Moore & Manning, 2001, p. 6), never afforded the tools nor the professional autonomy to question the assumptions behind what they are asked to do. Teachers may not ask, for example, about the feasibility of such slogans as "No Child Left Behind." They may not be given the space to challenge the content or purpose of the curriculum. They may not have opportunities to engage in any deep discourse about the quality of the society for which we are preparing children to be successful. Processes of assessment and measurement – where "data driven decision making" is core to the professional learning community model (Schmoker, 1999) – may, as observed by Elliot Eisner (1985), be mistaken for the more significant acts of evaluating and judging the worth of what is being measured. Critical pedagogy proposes that teachers cannot effect significant change in students' learning and lives unless their pedagogical choices and professional voices are informed by broader social and political contexts (Biesta, 1998). These broader social and political contexts include an understanding of the role of schools to promote social justice and of the political origins and ideologies behind policies. Westheimer (1999) argues that community rhetoric of the "feel good" variety can mask significant systemic inequalities, and Hatcher (1998) criticizes school improvement efforts that seek to raise standards overall, while failing to acknowledge or address systemic discrimination. Inequality, he believes, actually increases under such conditions.

Critical perspectives suggest that true leadership rests in our ability to deeply examine the status quo, and imagine new possibilities (Cibalka & Nakayama, 2000; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). All else, suggests Foster (1989), is mere management and maintenance. From a critical pedagogy perspective, so long as professional learning community models are aligned with the accountability movement, and teachers are required to focus their collaborative efforts on improving what already is, PLCs and other collaborative professional development models cannot be said to represent a fundamental shift in our leadership practices, nor in the way we "do school."

Tracing the Origins of the PLC

Curricularist Herbert Kliebard has often lamented the failure of school and curriculum reform efforts to master self-knowledge. Of course, this begs the question: what is self-knowledge? Generally, because it is the "lack" of self-knowledge that is lamented, perhaps it is best to begin with the problem of making sense of the world without self-knowledge. Lack of self-knowledge causes the human being to act without a sense of where she is going or from whence she has come. Without self-knowledge, she lacks the consciousness to locate herself in her own immediate experiences, and lacks the reflective capacity required for growth and change. Such a person stumbles about in a perpetual state of amnesia, travelling an unknown country without a map.

Cartesian philosophy links consciousness with the ability to use language. And, one masters a language through thoughtful experience – always the connection of the current to both the past and, because we humans are dynamic and forward moving, the future. Here we can make sense of Kliebard's claim of a "singular lack of dialogue that exists between present day practitioners in the field and their professional forebears:" (2000, p. 41). It is through language – reflexive and dialogical – that we become conscious of ourselves as historical beings. Lacking knowledge of interpretive traditions, our language becomes self-referential, reified, and narrowing. Without reference to a considered past, our language and knowledge is useful only for our immediate purposes; for example, a professional learning community becomes a thing that is only about now, and only about school activities as defined and presented by a handful of popular authors in the K-12 field. Perhaps such lack of connection is momentarily meaningful – like a good hand of solitaire – but, it holds the chance of fading away to the bin of banal and fleeting memories that share the characteristic that they are hardly worth making an effort to recall. Such memory-less actions tell us little about our truest purposes because their foundations are sandy. We must converse with and seek out our own history to know ourselves.

Thus, here I examine a few threads of a temporal tapestry. The professional learning community emerges as an element of a pattern of contesting beliefs about our potential to find meaning in our paid work. I trace highlights of collaborative models in workplaces, and find the PLC to be a moment in a lengthy conversation about tasks, relationships, and growth that does not need – perhaps does not want – a conclusion. While this is by no means an exhaustive history of ideas that inform the PLC model, a few key ideas, brought together, do serve to illustrate the point that our thinking about school change does come from somewhere.

The Learning Organization

Those unfamiliar with theories in management, practitioner learning and organizational learning might be surprised to discover the extent to which these theories inform the characteristics of the professional learning community, and the issues involved in its implementation. One key influence noted by Dufour and Eaker (1998) is the work of Peter Senge. Although many of the principles of "systems thinking" and organizational learning had previously been articulated by Argyris and Schon (1978), it was Senge's *Fifth Discipline* that brought the notion of the learning organization into popular discourse (Flood, 1999). In fact, Senge produced a later book that specifically applied his organizational learning principles to schools.[1]

Senge's work was a response to still highly current observations that the world of work was increasingly complex and subject to continuous change. Systems thinking is applied by Senge to help organizations and their workers function in this environment by becoming more adaptive, flexible, and responsive. As Hargreave's (2004) and others have pointed out, schools are no less subject to rapid and complex change, and are perhaps doubly burdened: not only must teachers themselves learn to become skilled and flexible learners in response to change, they must also model and teach these same skills to their students (Cibulka & Nakayama, 2001).

Along with pointing to environments characterized by continuous change, Senge's influence on professional learning communities can be located in emphases on collaborative learning and a shared vision for the organization. Like PLCs and other collaborative PD models that embody more distributed forms of school leadership, Senge (1990) emphasizes a devolution of organizational hierarchy and an environment that encourages innovative, risk-taking behaviour among staff.

Total Quality Management

Total quality management also has interesting parallels to professional learning communities. The founder of TQM, American statistician Dr. Edward Deming, is widely credited with the success story of manufacturing in post WWII Japan. His Total Quality Management model was widely applied in industry, first in Japan and much later in North American. It then captured the imagination of education reformers in the 1990s, generating a spate of literature about how its principles could be translated from corporations to schools and post-secondary institutions (Detert, Seashore & Schroeder,

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[1] Peter Senge applied his "five disciplines" to school setting in his (2000) *Schools That Learn: A Fifth Discipline Fieldbook for Educators, Parents and Everyone Who Cares About Education.*

2001; Sallis, 2002; Weller & Weller, 1997). *Out of the Crisis*, the title of Deming's 1984 tract, perhaps rang in perfect pitch with the panic to reform prompted by *A Nation At Risk*.

Many of TQM's principles are apparent in professional learning community models. Teacher collaboration teams bear resemblance to Deming's "quality circles." These quality circles (QC) are voluntary groups employing data to enhance work environments, improve production processes, and otherwise innovate. QC teams employ the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) Cycle, developed by Deming's colleague, Walter Shewhart. The dynamics of this cycle are similar to Argyris and Schon's (1978) double loop learning, and reflect the same iterative process used in action research. The QC process also depends upon the study and effective application of data to improve systems and processes in the organization. This strategy also emphasized in PLC models, wherein teachers are encouraged to study curriculum, student achievement on exams, and other sources of data to improve their teaching (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Schmoker, 1999). As is the case in school improvement literature, leadership must be emphasized over management if all of an organization's workers are to participate fully in the journey of continuous improvement (Bongstingl, 2001, Sallis, 2002). Leadership capacity, a concept explicated in school improvement literature (Lambert, 2003), has its parallel in industry in "full CI [or continuous improvement] capacity" in TQM (Murray & Chapman, 2003, p. 277).

Communities of Practice

TQM and the learning organization are managerial; they analyze organizations as systems, and prescribe systemic solutions to steer organizations out of problems and toward more effective implementations of organizational objectives. While both models attend to the morale and psychological needs of individuals in the workplace, they also do so in the interests of harnessing human resources toward organizational needs and goals – a point for which both models have been subject to criticism (Bottery, 2003; Connor, 1997; Fenwick, 1998).

Like the learning organization and TQM, Wenger's "communities of practice" model validates systems thinking and the social construction of knowledge in the workplace. But, Wenger's (1998) work is decidedly "unmanagerial." Drawing from earlier work with Jean Lave on "situated learning," (Lave & Wenger, 1991) it examines the emergent nature of practitioner knowledge in social contexts rather than focusing on how knowledge communities can be intentionally created. Wenger stresses that communities of practice vary in the degree to which their function and character are shaped by organizational interests and mandates; practices may or may not align with "institutional prescriptions….events…. [and] boundaries (p. 141). Conceptually, this may shed some light on misalignments between the planned use of professional learning communities in schools and districts, and the ways in which PLCs actually play out in practice.

Lave and Wenger's work, as well as Wenger's later work (1998), theorize about the connections between working in these communities of practice, and forming personal and professional identities as a result. The notions of "legitimate peripheral participation" and explications of community in terms of boundaries (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) could, from my reading, be potentially valuable means to examine the ways in which teacher knowledge in professional learning communities is produced and reproduced. Lave and Wenger pay particular attention to the experiences of newcomers and novices. Given growing interest in the mentorship of new teachers – another form of collaborative professional development that often blurs its boundaries with the work of professional learning communities – the community of practice model may add to an understanding of how PLCs socialize school newcomers and how they develop their formative professional habits and beliefs in these contexts.

Teacher Research

Like the communities of practice model, teacher research – particularly its more radical strains – take the emphasis off of organizational interests and focus on the emergent dimensions of professional learning. Teacher research is not so much a theory as a sort of "movement" embodying grassroots action research, reflective practice, and the assertion that, if teachers are systematically oriented to inquiry, they can generate professional knowledge rather than simply consuming that of outside experts (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Teacher research can venture into radical territory, employing participatory and critical emancipatory paradigms, and like Stenhouse (1983) posing vocal challenges to a perceived hegemony of outsider school research. While the particulars and philosophies behind teacher research have variations, overall, teacher research as active inquiry into local practice is considered to have a significant and positive impact on professional growth and commitment. (Darling-Hammond 1997, Sykes, 1999).

The extent to which teacher research may influence the professional learning community is interesting; much comes down to the question of whether PLC participants – and/or potentially the forces that mandate PLC activities – interpret critical inquiry in terms of increasing teachers' autonomy to define and study the problems of practice or, like Dufour & Eaker (1998), limit their conception of inquiry to the validation of outsider research that teachers "consume" (p. 220). The answer to this question is significant not only for what constitutes "knowledge" in a professional learning community but also, I believe, for its political consequences. The legitimacy of the teachers' role as an educational expert has bearing on the ways teachers negotiate knowledge in a PLC, and consequently hold power in school improvement efforts. This is a topic I take up in some detail in Chapter Four.

Conclusion

If the relative rarity with which I have encountered explicitly-stated links between the professional learning community to both contemporary and historical influences is any indication, we have made little progress with the predicament of ahistoricism Kliebard spoke of more than thirty years ago. The professional learning community model appears to be a new idea in education, but forays into organizational behaviour, industrial psychology, and workplace learning outside of the contexts of education reveal the extent to which this seemingly new idea is not so new at all.

Yet relatively little of reform and change literature in education makes links to this broader tradition. The absence of this context means that, in school professional development, we are rarely able to contextualize teacher professional development and learning within much larger questions of professional workers' growth and learning in general. We may be able to identify the role of teacher professional development as it pertains to the work of schools but, lacking more historical and hermeneutic approaches to the school improvement genre generally, we are able to make only limited meaning of teacher-as-learner.

In short, there is nothing remarkable or new about the idea of the professional learning community. PLCs have a clear and definite origin that can be traced by those who are afforded the time for this sort of investigation. Once the PLC has been given a historical context, it becomes less easy to embrace the model in a simple and straightforward manner. On the other hand, cynics may be hard-pressed to dismiss the idea in an equally simplistic manner, as a flash-in-the pan. The endurance of many principles in organizational learning – systems thinking, the contextualized and social nature of practitioner learning, and the importance of a community bound by common goals, for example – suggests that the professional learning community has something to offer for teachers and schools if we are willing to engage both its promises and it perils fully.

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Chapter Three: The "Professional" in the Professional Learning Community

We can always ask questions about why words are used in some ways and not others. In our more deliberate attempts to communicate – in scholarship, in poetry, in politics, in advertising – we choose words carefully to communicate a specific meaning, to cultivate certain beliefs, to affect certain emotional responses. Thus, when we examine the phrase "professional learning community," we might examine any of its constituent words to learn more about what the concept of the PLC means to those who work with the model. In this chapter, I consider ways in which we use and understand the word "professional" in relation to the professional learning community.

The notion of the learning community in and of itself is not new. It has gained popularity alongside growing appreciation of the contextualized and highly social nature of learning in general (Bandura, 1986; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1997; Wenger, 1998), and has recognizable manifestations in learning technology, adult learning, and workplace learning. The question of to what extent a teacher is a professional is not new either; there is no shortage of literature puzzling over whether teaching is a profession, a semi-profession, a vocation, or work that "anyone can do."

What is new is the way that this discourse about teacher professionalism plays out within the increasing use of embedded – and in some cases mandated – collaborative work and collaborative professional development. My curiosity about this question was piqued when I observed that the qualification of a learning community as *professional* is a phenomenon nearly exclusive to K-12 education. A brief "Google experiment" of the phrase yields results that rarely deviate from this norm, whereas searching the term "learning community" generates heterogeneous results. The question, then, is why, within K-12 education *in particular*, the learning community must be qualified as something that is professional. The ubiquity of the phrase "professional learning community" here may be attributed to mere habituated use, but even this use begs deeper scrutiny of what common meanings accompany common vocabulary.

This work begins with the assumption that the "professional" qualifier in teacher collaborative work is problematic. This does not mean that it is wrong or inappropriate; rather, it can imply different, contesting concepts of the teacher's role, and these concepts deserve further exploration. Toward this end, I examine ways in which the professional learning community model is shaping teacher professionalism. Every time we use the phrase "professional learning community" we are associating teacher professionalism with a certain context, and a certain set of behaviours and dispositions. These connotations have consequences for schools and educators at a time when, broadly speaking, we seem to recognize and accept the need for changes in the ways we "do school," yet remain stuck in stubborn patterns that resist our efforts to put ineffective paradigms and behaviours to pasture.

To approach the issue of "professionalism" in the professional learning community, (1) I begin with an examination of the current state of affairs for professionalism in a neo-liberal climate that emphasizes accountability and performativity. (2) I then turn to an examination of the specific implications of these larger patterns for public school teaching as a profession. (3) Finally, these considerations are used to lend context and insight into the discourses of teacher professionalism created within the PLC model.

Professions in the Present Day

What does it mean to be a professional? The question of teacher professionalism can – and, I believe should be – couched in a broader examination of the evolving role of the professional in society. An examination of professionalism from this perspective reveals that professionalism is not a static concept, but one specifically located in history, ideology, and epistemology. These broader considerations are important, particularly when they reveal myths and outdated paradigms that stall and stagnate our understanding of teacher professionalism rather than move the discourse forward in such ways that teachers can be empowered to work more effectively.

Defining Professionalism

Sociologists have long puzzled over the meaning of professionalism. The task of defining it – of deciding who is and who isn't a professional and why – has been all the more complicated by the changing contexts within which these forms of work take place. Although professions have been with us in one form or another since modernity, the category of professional, as we understand it today, is a 20th century phenomenon (Houle, 1980), emerging as a curious and still hazy mix of social status, exclusivity, specialized knowledge, privilege, responsibility, and moral imperative. Early 20th century definitions sought to define or classify occupations as more or less "professional" based on fixed traits (Tobias 2003). Although these have given way to more fluid and dynamic conceptions of professionalization that are less exclusionary and focused more on processes and continuous growth and refinement (Houle, 1980), some themes and characteristics occur consistently enough across taxonomical efforts (Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1933; Flexner, 1915; Houle, 1980; Millerson, 1964) as to warrant inclusion in any attempt to define professionalism for the purposes of a theoretical discussion.

First, professions are understood to be grounded is specialized and codifiable knowledge, obtained through post-secondary preparation (Brint, 1994; Collins, 1990; Eraut, 1994; McClure, 1999). Houle (1980) states that the foundations of applied professional knowledge can be traced to traditional academic disciplines, and that education for the professions thus includes greater or lesser degrees of general discipline knowledge along with explicit applied learning programs. Both general and profession-specific knowledge are gained through post-secondary education, resulting in post-secondary academic credentials (Eraut, 1994; Freidson, 1984).

Generally, professions are also understood to serve the public interest. Bertilsson (1990) describes the rise of the professions in relation to the growing complexity of the nation state. The rights of the individual citizen – whether articulated through liberal or socialist policies – became universalized and abstract; hence the articulation, protection and enforcement of citizens' rights came to require specialized knowledge. Lawyers, accountants, and a professional class of bureaucrats and managers were needed to master and apply this knowledge broadly and consistently on behalf of all citizenry. From this explanation, it is clear that professionalism has roots in service for the public good. Early structural functionalist accounts of professionalism emphasized the role of the professional as a mediator between citizen and state, protecting the interests and liberties of the individual citizen (Brint, 1994; Bertillson, 1990; Collins, 1990; Evett, 2003a; Tobias, 2003).

This role has infused professional status with a perceived ethical imperative that makes it distinct from other occupations. Whereas doctors, lawyers, teachers and social workers are clearly understood to have an important duty of care to their clients, the same is not so often perceived in most sales, management or administrative positions. Hence the idea of the professional is one associated with a higher “calling;” work is not just work but an important social service (Bertillson, 1990; Collins, 1990, Elkins, 1985). And while the purity of the vocational calling has been challenged by accusations of self-interest among the professions (Freidson, 2001), the ideal that professionals *should* be held to high moral standards is unquestioned.

The ideal that professionals voluntarily buy into this ethic of care, along with claims to specialized knowledge that cannot be monitored adequately by outsiders (Eraut, 1994; Freidson, 2001) form the foundations of another significant feature of professionalism: the idea of professional autonomy (Eraut, 1994; Evett, 2003a). This autonomy takes two main forms (Eraut, 1994). First, a degree of autonomy is afforded the individual practitioner. Judgments and actions are understood to be informed by specialized and contextualized knowledge not possessed by laypersons or outsiders (Frowe, 2005). The rationale is that the professional needs to be relatively free from the constraints of excessive bureaucracy, rules, and scrutiny in order to exercise her professional judgment and execute her work effectively. This argument for professional autonomy is frequently used to justify teachers’ freedom to do much as they please within their own classrooms.

The second layer of professional autonomy takes the form of regulation by professional associations (Freidson, 1984). The regulation of professional conduct by one’s peers has its foundations in some key premises: the belief that professional peers have in common the sense of calling and duty of care described above; the belief that the esteem of one’s professional peers serves as an adequate check of undesirable conduct (Evett, 2003b); and again, the belief that the nuances of professional practice cannot be understood and adequately guided by outsiders.

Because professional work requires specialized higher education, provides a degree of worker autonomy, is largely self-regulated, and tends to pay relatively well, the professions are also characterized with a degree of elitism and social status (Freidson, 1984; Evett, 2003a). The monetary and status rewards of professional work were key fodder in late 20th century critiques of the professions that focused on the ways in which the traditions, practices and *ideology* of professionalism afforded privileges that professional organizations, in turn, protected more on the basis of their own interests than those of the citizenry they served (Collins, 1990; Evett, 2003a; Freidson, 2001; Tobias, 2003).

Finally, it is important to note that trait-oriented definitions of a "professional" run the risk of de-emphasizing that professionalism is best defined not in the sense that it is so often used – as a set of personal traits found in individuals – but as a nexus of complex relationships between professionals, their clients, their professional organizations, and the state. It is to this understanding I turn as I explore the ways in which professionalism is in crisis.

The "Crisis of the Professions"

The "professional" learning community as a form of ongoing teacher development emerges at historical juncture in the latter 20th century within which not only teaching as a profession but professions in general are undergoing dramatic change, generally not perceived to be for the better (Broadbend, Dietrich & Roberts, 1997). "The Crisis of the Professions" begins Cyril Houle's significant (1980) "Continuing Learning in the Professions." In his introductory chapter, Houle outlines forces that disrupted the category of "professional" in the latter years of the 20th century: an explosion of specialized knowledge, increased demands for accountability, and a suspicious (and often litigious) public among them. The issues that Houle describes continue to resonate today, exacerbated by the complications of technology, neo-liberalism, globalism, and other "isms" that amount for professionals to a rather unenviable state of being increasingly accountable for professional decisions that are increasingly complicated and difficult to make. This state, along with faltering public confidence in professional knowledge and services, leaves the professions "fallen from grace."

To understand the extent of this fall, and hence the degree of crisis in professional work and professional identity it has engendered, requires an appreciation for the fact that the professions did enjoy a "golden age" in the post WWII era (Broadbent, Dietrich &

Roberts, 1997; Freidson, 2001). During this rise and pinnacle of the Keynesian welfare state, the work of professionals was well supported by public policy and funding, and their expertise was, for the most part, trusted and respected. Professionals operated with considerable autonomy, and professional organizations were either powerful in relation to the state (Freidson, 2003) or did not require a strong lobby to defend their worth, or their practices.

Trouble for professionals began, at least in part, with critiques that proposed professionalism as an ideological construct used to justify status and privileges for certain occupations, and to maintain their exclusivity (Bertillson, 1990; Evett 2003a; Freidson, 2003; Tobias, 2003). These neo-Weberian critiques examined the ways in which credentialing and self-regulation of the professions were used as market closure tools to create monopolies of professions (Tobias, 2003). It is difficult to say how much impact this theoretical discourse has had on the day-to-day workings of the professions, but it does seem to reflect a wider critical stance that challenges earlier faith in professional knowledge and professional ethics. Such scepticism is visible in labour and policy disputes played out in mass media, wherein professional organizations are often accused of acting more out of economic self-interest than a higher moral ground.

The professions have also been negatively impacted by the decline of the welfare state. Essentially, public services, once assumed to be an investment in the well-being of the state (Baumann, 2005), are now assumed to be drains on private interests and must justify their existence by constantly reproving their efficiency and value. First, the imperative for public services to justify their costs has resulted in a climate of high accountability (Broadbend, Dietrich & Roberts, 1997; Evett, 2003a). For the professional, the consequences are increased possibilities of litigation, and increasingly bureaucratic climates as tools and measures are imposed to measure the efficiency and effectiveness of their work. While accountability certainly has value, it can also constrain professional work to the extent that, ironically, it undermines effectiveness (Bottery & Wright, 2000; Frowe, 2005).

Increased accountability, coupled with the increasing tendency for professional work to be performed within larger and more complex organizations, means that professional work in both public and private sectors is constrained by bureaucracy and managerialism (Dent & Whitehead, 2002; Evett, 2003a). Especially for public sector professionals, this has meant that erosion of the autonomy to judge and direct one's own work. Freidson (2001) observes greater tendencies to standardize delivery of professional services in the interests of organizational and fiscal efficiency. Perhaps more seriously, managerialism may be altering professional identity as professionals are asked to incorporate managerial functions into their work (Broadbend, Dietrich & Roberts, 1997; Dent & Whitehead, 2002). Private sector professionals may be pressured to tie their professional identity to a corporate identity and its values (Dent & Whitehead, 2003), or to make decisions in the interests of profit (Brint, 1994; Freidson, 2003). The result may be professional work driven not by client interests or professional ethics, but by the manager's pre-occupation with the "bottom line."

Dent and Whitehead (2002) further argue that accountability and managerialism have an impact on professional knowledge itself. Whereas scholarship continues to show the contextual and nuanced nature of professional knowledge and professional judgment (Schon, 1983; Wenger, 1998), the climates within which professionals work are pre-occupied with measurable outcomes and scientific thinking. The result, state Dent and Whitehead, is a de-valuing of more narrative and situational ways of knowing. Further, in the interests of efficiency and accountability, particularly in large organizations, professional work is becoming more standardized, which again limits the scope of professional knowledge and professional judgment.

The sheer volume of knowledge and information, and the ways in which we disseminate it, have changed dramatically since the "golden years" of the professions, as well. The pace of change and complexity of modern social problems means that it is difficult for a professional group to keep up with or lay exclusive claim to specialized knowledge (McClure, 1999). The consequences of this shift are several fold, including a need for continuous learning to maintain skill and credibility (Cervero, 2000); an increased imperative to work collaboratively (Queeney, 2000; Middlehurst & Kennie, 1997), and the growth of narrow and deep specializations that both fragment professional identities and increase the need for interdisciplinary communication and teamwork skills.

Increased channels of media communication (particularly the Internet) and an explosion in the sheer volume of knowledge has decreased the mystique around professional knowledge, and raised uncertainty around professional's ability to stay on top of requisite specialized knowledge. It also means that clients, armed with more information, are more likely to behave as discriminating consumers, choosing among alternative providers (Bottery & Wright, 2000). This shift is often supported in policies that value consumer choice. In the present Canadian context, the school choice movement and increasing pressure to privatize healthcare are cases in point. Speed and complexity of knowledge change means that professionals are in the business of 'risk management," responsible for physical and psychic well-being, and social, legal and economic stability under conditions of constant uncertainty (Evett, 2003a).

Summarily, it should be clear that when we take up the topic of teacher professionalism, we are working within a complex and changing conditions for all professional work. Popular conceptions of professionalism continue to be derived from many of the static traits traditionally associated with professionalism – specifically the "uber-professions" of medicine and law – and it is my belief that much of the discourse surrounding teacher professionalism continues in this vein. It is also my assertion that these are dead ends, for trait-oriented approaches foreclose on important discourses about the conditions under which professional identity is constructed, and professional work takes place. In the following section, I move toward a better understanding of teachers' work under these conditions.

Teaching as a Profession

I believe there is a tendency in K-12 education to silo issues related to professionalism and professional development, when in fact the field is characterized by many of the same concerns, trends, and tensions that occupy professional education discourses more generally. Thus the "teacher as professional" is bracketed from broader considerations of what it means to be a professional in a post-modern, late capitalist society. The difficulty posed is that parochial understandings of professionalism may make it easier to boil the concept down to a set of instrumental behaviours, assumptions and attitudes. Sometimes these result in defensive, knee-jerk reactions when challenges to teachers' knowledge, judgment, and autonomy are perceived. It is as if teachers demand professional status and fear it at the same time; this is a chief observation and complaint in *Teaching & The Knowledge Society*, Andy Hargreave's (2003) intensive prescription for the future of teaching.

In what ways do present constructs of teacher professionalism – including those upheld by teachers themselves of teachers themselves – undermine a sort of professionalism that would genuinely uplift teachers, students and schools? While there are multiple ways in which this question might be answered, I choose here to focus on three key themes that arise frequently in such discussions, and prove to be significant criteria in construction of teacher-as-professional within the professional learning community. First, if the "learning" in a community is the generation and sharing of knowledge, we must ask what constitutes knowledge in the field of K-12 teaching. Second, collaborative models challenge a long tradition of autonomous classroom practice for teachers, prompting a re-evaluation of professional autonomy. Finally, professional learning communities, by virtue of being described as *communities*, raise questions about the norms and values that bind school communities together; this in turn raises questions about the nature of professional ethics in teaching.

Question: The Legitimacy of Teacher Knowledge

Knowledge is the currency of a professional learning community. When teachers come together, they use and share what they know. But what is the nature of what teachers "know?" This question raises epistemological questions of what counts as true knowledge, and touches upon problems raised by Dent and Whitehead (2002) and Eraut (1994) regarding the stubborn dominance of scientism in definitions of professional knowledge. Drawing from Foucault's work, Dent and Whitehead link power and knowledge, noting that "for professional status to be legitimized, it has to be based on 'scientific' knowledge and/or validated by 'scientific' knowledge" (2002, p. 8). In essence, Dent and Whitehead delineate battle lines between subjective and objective ways of knowing, and observe that narrative knowledge tends to be on the losing side in defining and legitimizing professionalism.

This dichotomy creates multiple tensions for teachers and schools. First, as pointed out by Ben-Peretz (2001) and Frowe (2005), climates of intense accountability demand codifiable and measurable standards and outcomes for the purposes of evaluation; yet much of successful classroom work notoriously difficult to measure. Teachers, for example, constantly seek to "engage" students – to motivate and interest them in their learning. Because this experience is affective and subjective, it cannot be measured; yet, it is critical to successful student learning. Similarly, teachers are almost universally frustrated by standardized testing for its ability to capture only measurable forms of teaching and learning outcomes, and for the pressure it creates to "teach to the test," often at the perceived expense of the higher order thinking that is, at least in theory, aspired to in curriculum guides. Hargreaves (2003) and Ben-Peretz (2001) argue that scientific thinking is founded on paradigms of certainty and predictability – a model no longer appropriate for teachers who must prepare students to negotiate complexity and uncertainty in a post-industrial, technology driven and global climes. Yet policies that emphasize accountability and efficiency in education demand precisely the sorts of certainty that teachers cannot deliver.

A second tension created by the dominance of objective knowledge is that teaching is perennially plagued by perceptions that "anyone can teach." While claims that doctors, lawyers, accountants and engineers are "professionals" via their highly specialized knowledge, the same claims of teaching to pedagogy as specialized knowledge are contested (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2001; Kerscher & Caufman, 1995; McClure, 1996; Winch, 2005). Teachers' professional associations and unions recognize this difficulty, and have sought to codify and value teachers' professional knowledge through professional development, various accreditation schemes, and systems of rewards and recognition for highly skilled and educated teachers. The effectiveness of these efforts has, however, been plagued by the ambiguous and often politically volatile role of these teachers' professional organizations and unions (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2001; Kerscher & Caufman, 1995; McClure, 1996).

Thus teachers' knowledge claims are situated within much larger epistemological discourses, in turn shaped by social, political, and economic forces. Teachers may contribute to their own delegitimization by failing to recognize this. It is not their fault, perhaps; as Cobb, McClain de Silva Lamberg & Dean (2003) argue, lack of time to reflect and the immediacy of daily life in schools work against the sort of systemic thinking that is required for a wide-scale shift in teachers' professional identity and behaviours.

In particular, I suspect that most teachers do not consider their daily classroom decisions as falling within a rubric of competing knowledge claims, nor do they necessarily recognize the role of epistemology in their professional status. For, although "scientific" knowledge still rules the day in terms of professional legitimacy, a powerful alternative discourse is created in the fields of teacher research and reflective practice. Authors like Linda Darling-Hammond, Gary Sykes, and Marilyn Cochran-Smith have contributed significantly to a counter-paradigm that seeks to solidify the kind of knowledge that teachers use by unifying it within its own theoretical discourse. However, until such time as teachers recognize the necessity of constructing counter-discourses to scientism, and contribute to this counter-discourse through the actions of their daily practices, alternatives are unlikely to have to power to stand up to entrenched epistemologies.

It is also possible that teachers somewhat unconsciously "buy in" to positivist knowledge as the foundation for professionalism. Fournier (1999) proposes that the ideology of professionalism may serve as a disciplinary mechanism, an idea that Evetts (2003b) extends by discussing the positive connotations of being deemed "competent" and "a professional," and the concomitant fear of being dubbed incompetent, or amateurish in the performance of one's work. Thus ideology can serve as a means of regulating professional behaviour from within, by shaping the way one constructs his or her own professional identity.

Some of this ideological regulation may take place through the "rather unusual emphasis on such occupations as medicine and law" (Evett, 2003a, p. 396), which seems to serve as a benchmark for professionalism, regardless off its appropriateness. Constant comparisons to the medical profession – specifically to doctors – may act as a bait-and-switch, wherein the higher status of these professions (Caldwell, 2000; McClure, 1999) leads some teachers to associate professional status with the sorts of knowledge claims appropriate in the medical sciences, but much less appropriate in the social sciences. Such comparisons between doctors and teachers are often present in literature about teacher professionalization (Caldwell, 2000; Hargreaves, 1997; US. Department of

Education, 2004; Winch, 2005) so it is not unreasonable to wonder whether teachers professional self-concept is shaped (negatively) by this onslaught. Further, popular constructs of the "higher professions" are themselves fraught with mythology (Eraut, 1994), creating romanticized standards of knowledge and care against which teachers are, I believe, unfairly assessed.

At their worst, such romanticized comparisons to other professions can extend into an unreflective sense of entitlement by teachers themselves, dubbed by Sarah Lorenz as "professional whining" (2000). Here, discourses of professionalism are reduced to the sorts of trait-based approaches that do not reflect the true complexity of professional work. Lorenz provocatively argues that teachers undermine their professionalism by focusing less on their own actions than on the dearth of status, rewards and recognition for their work.

The legitimization of teachers' professional knowledge thus continues to be an uphill endeavour. Entrenched epistemologies that privilege objectivity and scientism; policies, ideologies and myths that uphold this fundamental belief; and indeed many of the behaviours and beliefs of teachers themselves, suggest that PLCs have a long way to go in terms of serving as sites that enhance the validity and status of practitioner knowledge.

Question: The Legitimacy of Teachers' Professional Autonomy

The autonomy to exercise one's own knowledge and judgment in service to one's clients is a hallmark of professionalism (Eraut, 1994). Status is also associated with autonomy: professionals' daily actions are (again at least in theory) not subject to the same watchful eye as many other occupations where an immediate supervisor is present. Thus professionals are perceived to enjoy better working conditions via greater freedom on the job. Further, autonomy holds enormous appeal in western society, where individualism is highly regarded. For the professional – certainly for the practicing educator – this translates to a great deal of value placed on the freedom to put one's own personal stamp or "spin" on one's practices, to be creative and expressive through one's work.

Both Eraut (1994) and Evetts (2003b), however, argue that these are rather romanticized beliefs and values: they form an "ideology" of professionalism that is often misaligned with reality. Teaching, like many professions, seems to take the gold standard of autonomy to be that enjoyed by professionals who are "self-employed or partners in small practices" (Eraut, 1994, p. 224). "However," Eraut continues, "the proportion of professionals employed in this way is quite small....That level of power and status is but a dream for most professional workers" (p. 224). Both private and publicly practicing professionals are in fact subject to many controls within their organizations, and answer to multiple stakeholders who have multiple and sometimes conflicting demands.

For teachers, this stakeholdership includes students, parents, a wider community of businesses and community service organizations, and a more abstract and removed community of citizens, represented through various levels of elected government and their respective policies. The size of the teaching force and its direct and obvious dependence on the state as schools are publicly funded also means that teachers' work is particularly subject the tides of political change (Friedson 2001; McClure, 1999) – teachers are buffeted about perhaps more fiercely than those professions with stronger historic ties to private sources of funding/income, and a more solid history of mediation through professional organizations. Teachers' autonomy is further limited by the centralization of curriculum, and accountability measures imposed by governments with strong policy agendas (Ben-Peretz 2001, Bottery & Wright, 2000).

Thus, if teachers appeal to "professionalism" to assert their autonomy in the classroom, or claim that they are being "deprofessionalized" by increasingly restrictive government policies or bureaucratic structures, they may very well be calling upon a standard that doesn't exist. Beyond questions of the feasibility of professional autonomy lie further questions more value-oriented in nature: to what extent and under what conditions is the professional autonomy of teachers desirable?

For Bottery and Wright (2000), teacher autonomy is a widely-held norm, but a misguided one. Many experienced teachers were trained and acculturated to this norm; however, conditions of teaching have changed since the "golden age" of state and public trust in professions (Ben-Peretz, 2001; Bottery & Wright, 2000; Hargreaves, 2003). Mitchell and Sackney (2000) believe that a systems perspective on education is the only way to create thriving schools: "[T]he teacher's world of work is far more complex than it used to be, and [teachers] cannot deal adequately deal with the tough problems and the deep mysteries of teaching and learning if they base their practice on individual interests and perogatives" (p. 4).

Eraut (1994) argues that, for most professionals – and I believe that teachers could certainly be included here – concerns about professional autonomy are immediate and individualistic: autonomy refers to the extent to which the professional worker is able to make his or her own decisions in the context of daily practice. McLure (1999) is critical of this emphasis on individual autonomy: where teachers' conceptions of professional autonomy involve closing the classroom door, insularity and disengagement from change imperatives are almost inevitable. In other words, autonomy asserted at the level of individual practice may draw educators' energies away from more pressing and powerful forms of professional autonomy executed at more collective levels.

Insistence on individual professional autonomy, particularly when confused with what I believe to be excessive individualism in teaching practices, may also have the ironic impact of undermining teaching as a profession overall. A function of a professional organization is the establishment and regulation of professional standards via a body of one's peers. These practices are designed to enhance public trust in professional services. Thus, when teachers are resistant to supervision, to peer review, or to collaborative work, they are missing out on this important facet of professionalism.

Recalling Bertillson (1990) and Friedson (1984), the professional organization also serves as an intermediary between the state and its citizens, protecting and advocating for clients through its collective power to influence policy. Where teachers may feel a lack of personal empowerment, they may also overlook opportunities to exercise professional judgment in the more collective forms offered by professional organizations and associations. A more collective sense of professionalism, exercised through participation in larger communities of practice (Cobb, McClain, de Silva Lamberge, & Dean, 2003) and political engagement via teachers' unions and professional organizations (McClure, 1999), appears to be the most promising means by which the idea of professional autonomy can positively impact the work of schools. "Autonomy," states James Elkin (1984), "affords practitioners the opportunity to express and to take responsibility for a social and political vision" (p. 942). Such work cannot be executed individually; it requires collective action. This would seem to favour the sorts of collaborative work that can be facilitated by professional learning communities.

Question: The Legitimacy of Teaching as a Moral Practice

All professions have codes of ethics, because all professionals possess power in the form of their specialized knowledge, their licenses to practice, and sometimes their cultural capital in the form of status, and this power is to be exercised for the benefit of clients. Or at least so goes the theory. But, the application of ethics in daily practice is messy; it quickly (and unsurprisingly) lays any elegant theory of professional morality to waste.

Indeed, one critique of written codes of ethics for professionals is precisely that they create an illusory sense of certainty, as if deontological (principle-driven) approaches to ethical problem solving can generate clear and satisfactory solutions to morally troubling questions in practice (Elkin, 1985; Small, 2001). Further, more analytical or rule-bound approaches are premised on the notion of autonomous moral agency: in other words, we presume that we can make ethical decisions on our own, without consulting others. Others may be the objects of our moral reasoning and our morally justified actions, but we do not go further to involve others as subjects who share in the process of determining ethical outcomes.

Of course this is all very theoretical, and I doubt that most practicing professionals would claim that an autonomous and purely analytical approach to ethical decision-making is even feasible given complex work environments and, often, multiple stakeholders (Eraut, 1994). Further, when we make ethical decisions, they often affect people we care about and people in our care. It is therefore difficult to be dispassionate and transcendent in our reasoning (in the Kantian sense); rather, we are apt to consider feelings, relationships, and contextual factors in our ethical reasoning (Carr, 2005).

It is precisely these objections to more analytical approaches that have led some authors to advocate for more communal relational ethics, or an "ethics of care" (Furman, 2004). This alternative model seems particularly appropriate for schools, where teachers often have intimate relationships with colleagues, and with students in their care. It is the reason why Nel Noddings (2005) has consistently advocated for student teacher relationships characterized by wholistic and personal regard for the individual rather than what Carr (2005) contrasts as dispassionate universalism.

I believe most teachers relate more readily to an ethics of care than the analytical language and thinking embodied in more abstract moral principles and ethical codes. However, elements of either approach inform the daily moral life of teaching and schools, and tensions between these approaches have a bearing on practice. To explicate these tensions more clearly, I begin with the observation that, ideally speaking, our morals or underlying values are aligned with our beliefs and actions, and I further assume that, in cohesive and high-functioning social groups – here for example a school – group members share similar values which generate similar norms of practice.

With this in mind, even the most caring and cohesive schools are still often between a proverbial rock and hard place in their decision-making. On the one hand is the orientation to care: on the other, accountability and outcomes-driven policies, which in turn must generate norms of practice in schools – are more philosophically aligned with deontological or "contract" ethics than an affective and contextualized ethics of care. This tension is evidenced in the popularity of such slogans as "All children succeed," or "Learning for all," which appeal to a universal sense of duties and entitlements.

Such standardized goals for student learning are often deemed appropriate activities for professional learning communities and other collaborative work. Thus, collaborating participants are asked to determine right courses of action deontologically and analytically within environments – the school community and the professional learning "community" itself – that are more likely to elicit decision-making based on an ethic of care. These competing moral paradigms, I believe, lie at the source of much cynicism surrounding PLC work.

The tension might have some resolution – or at least a workable compromise – were it not for a further and more practical problem: Teachers – and I expect harried professionals in general – are rarely afforded the time and space for ethical deliberation, either through private reflection or collegial conversation. It is a cause, perhaps, of what Elkin (1995) criticizes as a pragmatic or even arrogant reliance on the unexamined belief that "professionalism" is inherently moral. In practice, this translates to equally unexamined "short cut" applications of policies and ethical guidelines.

We have all likely witnessed the sort of professional folly that Elkin describes, but I believe that there is a saving grace in that this is equally matched or bettered by a persistent if less obvious inclination to an ethic of care. I have heard many teachers refer to their "calling," suggesting that more spiritual, caring, and passionately committed dimensions inform their ethical reasoning. Carr (2005) is correct to note that deontological ethics have an obvious role in regulating professional behaviour and equally correct to observe that this paradigm is not sufficient on its own to generate good teaching.

What remains to be seen – and collaborative work is an interesting new stage for the question – is whether school improvement, especially in current policy contexts driven by standardization and accountability measures, can be fostered by an ethic of care that recognizes the depth of relationship that grounds so much of our teaching and learning.

The "Professional" Learning Community

I have proposed that teaching as a profession is subject to disruptions being experienced by all professions, and that these disruptions are the product of systemic forces – neo-liberal ideology, exponential growth of knowledge and information, technology, and education policies that emphasize accountability based on standardized and measurable outcomes. Specifically, for teaching, I have considered the impact of these forces on some key defining areas of teachers' professionalism: epistemology, or what "counts" as legitimate professional knowledge in teaching; autonomy with regard to appropriate balances of individual and collective action in teaching practices; and ethics, or a deeper investigation into the nature of the values and beliefs that bind (or fragment) a school community.

If professional learning communities are (as many suggest) to be the "new" way in which schools implement policy changes, provide for professional development, and otherwise manage educational change (DuFour, Eaker & DuFour, 2005; Hargreaves, 2003; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Zmuda, Kuklis & Kline, 2004), we can also expect that PLCs will be the places in which many of these forces that shape teacher professionalism will be played out. The question of professional socialization is thus significant to our understanding of professional learning communities.

The socialization of teachers in preservice training is explicit and deliberate; it is part and parcel of the hidden curriculum of undergraduate teacher education. Once teachers begin practice, however, much of teachers' socialization into their profession becomes hidden and haphazard. Despite the professionalizing efforts of teacher unions and professional regulatory bodies (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2001; Kerscher & Caufman, 1995; McClure, 1996), few teachers seem to embrace a professional identity linked to a larger, explicitly normative professional culture. Rather, teachers' professional identities tend to the local and particular. In schools where the standards and norms of professional behaviour are explicit and effective, this grassroots constructivism is a positive force. However, in schools where professional identity is either dysfunctional or not actively considered at all, professional culture becomes problematic. "Professionalism" will be diffuse and implicit: fraught with unexamined assumptions and offering few opportunities to express, test, and refine beliefs and practices in conditions beyond the immediacy of daily life within teachers' individual school environments.

Alberta's experiences with professional learning communities, some captured by the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement, clearly show the power of a PLC model to make professional norms more explicit. Among the most frequent outcomes of collaborative work within the PLC model was an enhanced sense of teacher professionalism (Taylor, Servage, McRae & Parsons, 2006). Alberta schools, through AISI, have created documents and narratives that point to observable practices that teachers themselves define as "professional." And, if teachers experience a greater sense of "professionalism" through their engagement with one another in collaborative work (Little, 1990; Taylor et. al., 2006; Wilms 2003) it may be a consequence of the professional learning community model (and other collaborative models) that explicit professional norms are created – a set of practices, beliefs and values at more local levels – that are actively engaged in daily professional practice.

However, as I now hope to show more clearly, the PLC as a model in no way provides a unified or definitive case for teacher "professionalism." Far from the monolith implied in its use as an adjective (*professional* learning community), collaborative efforts have the potential to create any number of norms of practice. If we attribute a fair bit of power to the PLC model to create teachers' sense of professionalism as a consequence of the activities teachers engage in as they "practice" the learning community, it follows that we ought to consider the different ways in which this professionalism might be constructed. Certainly multiple interpretations are available, and certainly these interpretations will undergo permutations and create hegemonies of professionalism given different political, economic and social climes. What, then, are the possible ways in which a professional learning community might construct professional norms?

To exemplify some of these possibilities, I'd like to turn now to a bit of hermeneutic "play:" connotations, associations and patterns of understanding that might be created by different images of professional action in the collaborative contexts of a professional learning community. While these are by no means categorical or exhaustive, I hope they serve as an interesting stimulus for conversation: an examination of the nuances we may be overlooking or taking for granted when we speak of *professional* learning communities. I have chosen four conceptual models to explore: the professional as a *scientist*; the professional as a *caring moral agent*; the professional teacher as an *advocate*; and the professional teacher as a *learning manager*. None of these ideas is new; however we have not much considered their impact on the workings of professional learning communities. This is my task at hand.

Is the Professional Teacher a Scientist?

In just one of ubiquitous comparisons with the medical profession, Caldwell (2002) describes his vision of teacher professionalism:

> One expects doctors…to make use of an increasingly sophisticated battery of tests and select a treatment…[to]keep up to date with the latest developments in their field through private reading and successful participation in regularly organized programs of professional development….We expect full accountability….It is…entirely appropriate to show that teachers can be as fully professional as medical specialists, whose status in this regard is held in society to be unquestionable.

Caldwell's description reflects the sorts of romanticism that I have already noted tend to emerge in reference to the medical field (see also Eraut, 1994; Evett, 2003a), and certainly conveys a faith in "tests" and "treatments" to determine right courses of professional action. His vision aligns nicely with policies that privilege scientism, or what Tobias (2003) describes as "technicist and instrumentalist" beliefs that science can be relied upon to solve complex problems (p. 450). A major tenet of the United States' *No Child Left Behind* Act is the encouragement of "scientifically-based research" (p. iii) and educational interventions based on "scientifically-valid knowledge" (p.iv). (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Similarly, Alberta's Initiative for School Improvement has encouraged "evidence-based practice" drawn from "solid research" (Alberta Government, 2006).

Should the teacher, then, consider himself to be a professional if he is performing a "sophisticated battery of tests" and determining appropriate "treatments" in the classroom? Are these the sorts of activities that make a learning community into a *professional* learning community? Policy emphases on "hard evidence" suggest that, when teachers are mandated to collaborate in professional learning communities, they may also be mandated to engage only in ways perceived to further the "science" of teaching. If positivism dominates what constitutes knowledge in teachers' collegial work, we can expect professional learning communities to focus their efforts on the sorts of performativity advocated by Dufour & Eaker (1998) and the U.S. Department of Education – namely : namely the focus on "what students should know and be able to do," (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). What science is – what research is – has been defined as that which is observable and measurable.

An unfortunate consequence of using words like "scientific," "rigorous" and "solid" and "evidence" is the narrowing of our understanding of teacher research. I have suggested that a rich body of theory is available to structure and apply more qualitative forms of inquiry, and that teachers may be "missing it" when they do not recognize the power of this alternative approach to developing and sharing professional knowledge.

It may be a little over the top to suggest that the professional learning community is an epistemological battleground. In practice, it is difficult to isolate the effects of quantitative and qualitative ways of knowing on teaching practices. But it is fairly safe to say that present policy contexts discourage the use of qualitative, subjective or "craft" knowledge in teachers' professional discourses. If teachers are able to recognize the PLC as a site of knowledge construction with implications for their professional legitimacy and professional identity, perhaps we will see stronger advocacy for the legitimization of practitioner research as a much needed counter to the hegemony of scientism in professional knowledge. However, this advocacy would also require a rethinking of what I have suggested is an over-emphasis on individual professional autonomy at the expense of more collective forms of professional action.

Is the Professional Teacher a Caregiver?

In the most idealized sense, professionals are thought to care for their clients by placing client interests above their own (Eraut, 1994). For teachers, these fiduciary relationships usually take the form of commitment to the best interests of students, (Stefkovich & O'Brien, 2004) and for many teachers, this commitment is passionate and heartfelt. Traditionally, however, professional care has been understood as a form of duty or obligation, founded on transcendent, Kantian ethics. Carr (2005) draws another example between doctors and teachers to illustrate this idea:

> Just as we should expect doctors, by virtue of their Hippocratic oath, to place the needs of any and all suffering humanity—irrespective of class, color or creed – before their own personal…interests, so we might expect teachers to be impartially or disinterestedly attentive to the educational needs of all pupils….[W]hy should teaching not be impersonal in just this sense? Why, in short, shouldn't teachers treat pupils with the polite but disinterested formality that (good) lawyers and doctors exhibit towards their clients and patients? (Carr, 2005, p. 256).

The question is rhetorical. In fact, Carr makes an eloquent case for the most humanistic aspects of teaching, arguing that professional ethics in teaching must rest in intrinsically-motivated "virtuous personal association" (p. 264). Carr claims that, for some professions – for example teaching and the ministry, it is far more important that professional care (and its philosophical underpinnings) be understood as occurring within the context of relationships. For Carr, teaching and learning shape "the very fabric of human moral and civil association;" hence mere duty and prescript is an insufficient moral foundation for teachers' dispositions and actions (2005, p. 262).

Carr's claim is shared by many others who argue that teachers' professional conduct must be grounded in relationships and contexts rather than only an abstract justice orientation of contractual rights and obligations (Campbell, 2003; Furman, 2004; Sergiovanni, 1994; Starratt, 1994; Stefkovich & O'Brien, 2004); and, with the possible exception of large undergraduate lectures that lend themselves well (if questionably) to an impartial and disinterested moral stance on the part of the instructor, I have certainly yet to discover a way of teaching that does not cause me to form some sort of a relationship with my students. As a consequence, our moral reasoning as teaching professionals is always bound up in the affective dimensions of relationship. This reasoning justifies the appropriateness of the ethic of care to teaching.

However, authors who advocate for ethics of care do not restrict their visions to isolated relationships between teachers and individual students (Gregory, 2000; Sergiovanni, 1994; Starratt, 1994). Noddings has persistently emphasized the familial aspects of a school community (2005). Beck's (1999) review of school change literature shows that school communities are widely imagined in intimate terms – families or villages characterized by interdependence, common values, nurturing relationships, and an emergent, organic quality that confounds more rational models of organizational life.

Given these connotations of "community," what might a professional learning *community* guided by an ethic of care look like? Because education is here conceived holistically, teachers' collaborative efforts would focus not only on academic achievement, but on cultivating students' talents, gifts, and character in the interests of serving others (Noddings, 2005; Starrat 1994). Many also draw connections between the caring orientation and democracy (Furman, 2004; Gregory, 2000; Sergiovanni, 1994; Starrat, 1994), suggesting that PLCs would occupy themselves with work that furthers the school community as a democratic forum. The ethic of care also calls for highly personal forms of reflective practice (Campbell, 2003; Elkin, 1984), wherein active moral reasoning takes place in critical reflections and critical conversations about how to best serve students. We might summarize that a PLC founded on an ethic of care would place a high priority on positive, nurturing relationships within the PLC itself, and within the wider community of a school's staff and students. The "content work" of such professional learning communities would likely extend beyond pedagogical considerations for academic achievement because teachers would also value and pursue work that fostered students' gifts and moral characters as well. The processes of such a community would be self-consciously democratic and reflective.

This window into the potential activities of a professional learning community guided by an ethic of care addresses a longstanding unease I have experienced with the PLC model popularized by Dufour & Eaker (1998). I locate this unease in a seeming disjoint between the concepts of "professional" and "community," as these were presented by the authors. The problem is that professionalism founded on positivism and managerialism, in the form of teachers engaging data and testing to improve student learning, is too easily conflated with a more affective and moral dimension inherent in the notion of community. My reviews of AISI reports for previous publications (Alberta Learning, 2004; Taylor, Servage, McRae & Parsons, 2006) seem to bear this contention out: While the policy aims behind Alberta Education's support for professional learning communities were largely aimed at improved student achievement, schools diligently reported standardized exam results as required, but focused their interpretive energies on the more affective dimensions of their PLC work: these included the increased enthusiasm and engagement of teachers and students, improved collegial climates, increased empowerment and creativity in teaching, and senses of renewal and momentum in schools.

There is no reason to assume that multiple goals cannot be inherent in "improved student learning," nor that multiple constructs of professionalism to this end cannot co-exist. Indeed AISI work suggests that many schools were able to work in a manner that focused on academic rigour and also improved school climates, overall student engagement, and teacher collegiality. However, there are hazards in our uncritical alignment of "professionalism" and "community" in the PLC model. One possibility – one that anecdotal evidence from Alberta schools suggests – is that the PLC model may be forcefully implemented in a manner that actually undermines community. Here, cynicism may be bred if teachers sense that the inherent "ethic of care" in community relationships is being exploited to further dehumanizing and technocratic standards-driven outcomes. The opposite is also possible: teachers may focus on positive affective outcomes of an increased sense of community without giving critical considerations to the ends that are being furthered through this collegial work. Whether the medicine is good for us or not, at least once "sweetened" by collegiality, we can swallow it.

Is the Professional Teacher an Advocate?

It is possible to create a professional learning community that focuses on measurable outcomes. It is also possible to create a PLC that focuses on relationships. However, neither the "scientific" PLC nor the "caring community" PLC necessarily recognizes the political dimensions of schooling. The "scientific" model breeds a myopic study of data and a forfeit of most real knowledge construction or reflective deliberation about the ends of the work on the part of teachers. The "caring community" model, I believe, more closely approximates the way(s) teachers think about their work. However, care, in and of itself, does not necessarily guarantee that power will be shared in equal and just ways within the school community. Beck (1999) cautions that romanticizing schools as communities may cause us to neglect the political dimensions of education.

Starrat's (1994) ethical framework for schools seeks to recognize the political dimensions of education by balancing an "ethic of critique" with an "ethic of care" and an "ethic of justice." As Starratt describes it, the ethic of critique, drawn from the critical theory tradition, digs beneath what seems normal and natural to challenge unjust social arrangements: "The theme of critique forces educators to confront the moral issues involved when schools disproportionately benefit some groups in society, and fail others" (p. 47). Critical pedagogy begins with the assumption that schools should be places where students are taught to pursue social justice through democratic practices (Merrett, 2004).

If we couple critical pedagogy with structural accounts of professionalism that draw attention to the special role of the professional as a mediator between the state and citizenry (Bertillson, 1990; Tobias, 2003) we have a foundation for constructing the professional teacher as an advocate for social justice, within the school and beyond it. If we thus define "professionalism," what are the implications for the processes and outcomes of a professional learning community?

An orientation to critical pedagogy in a professional learning community could offer significant strengths. First, as I have argued in an earlier chapter, a PLC creates an embedded and collegial structure within which critical reflective practices can occur. It is possible that one reason teachers are not more politically engaged is because they do not imagine they can make a difference, or have any real say in what schools are, or should be. Although some of these interests are represented collectively through unions and professional organizations, I have suggested that teachers' thinking tends to be local and immediate. The politics of education, as they are duked out by governments and professional bodies, may be too removed to engage many teachers in ways that are meaningful to them.

If there is a void created here for teachers' sense of their own political efficacy, the professional learning community model, with an appropriate dose of critical pedagogy, has an interesting potential as a highly local but structured means to more fully engage teachers, and by extension their students and school community, with social justice issues. In such engagements, justice would not simply a curricular "add on." In some schools, sidestepping politics is akin to putting heads in the sand. For example, in schools with high Aboriginal or ESL student populations, a strict focus of collaborative efforts on "improved student learning" is unlikely to be successful if participants are unable to have conversations about systemic issues that produce achievement gaps with glaring correlations to race or socio-economic status.

Critical pedagogy provides a theoretical tool that teachers can use to name the problems their students are experiencing in more holistic ways that incorporate academic, social and systemic barriers to school success. In this way, professionalism is manifested in advocacy on behalf of students and parents who lack the knowledge, resources, or social capital to benefit fully and fairly from public education. Critical pedagogy could also shape the ways knowledge is created and used within the professional learning community. Critical pedagogy positions teachers and students to consider relationships between knowledge and power. Anderson and Herr (1999), for example, believe teacher research is presently marginalized, at least in part because it is a potential threat to the hegemony of traditional, codified forms of knowledge and research. Cochran Smith and Lytle (1999) argue that these traditional forms of knowledge disempower teachers by increasing their dependency on outsider expertise, and downplaying the value of more local and particular forms of teacher learning and teacher knowledge. With epistemological assumptions that privilege outsider knowledge, a professional learning community can create a collegial environment while still reinforcing a passive and consumptive approach to learning.

However, the professional learning community model has the potential to shift this balance of power if its activities focus on critical evaluations of outsider expertise, and on the co-creation of new knowledge through teacher research. Using critical-emancipatory (action) research, the PLC could itself, or with the larger school community (by involving students and parents) undertake "learning" that is qualitatively different than the technique-driven pedagogy that seems to dominate current collegial activities (Bottery & Wright, 2000; Codd, 2005). In this way, professionalism might entail teacher advocacy for the legitimacy of teachers' own, situated practitioner knowledge.

If there is a downside to a professional learning community that actively engages in critical pedagogy, it may be that this form represents too great a challenge to the norms and values that presently guide most schools to be a realistic alternative. Present policies that shape the decisions about how collaborative time will be used are inimical to the active pursuit of social justice as a learning process or objective. Teachers themselves may also have difficulty getting their heads wrapped around this kind of PLC: it requires that teachers buy into the premises of critical pedagogy, and make a priority of collaborative activities that would further social justice. Such a global and long-term objective seems unlikely in the face of other pressing and practical concerns such as assessment practices and curriculum study.

As Herr's (1999) account of how a teacher research project spawned a significant politicization of student race issues to not untroubling ends, a focus on social justice that highlights race, class, gender or other forms of social difference can antagonize a school's staff and students. Herr's work highlights the micropolitical complexities of schools and the extent of the deliberative communication skills required to manage these. Potentially, these dynamics are debilitating to the functioning of the learning community , and to a school's ability to help students learn. While these are not causes in and of themselves to avoid political issues, they should serve as a cautionary note.

Is the Professional Teacher a Learning Manager?

If the medical field has furthered conceptions of professionals as disinterested scientists, the increasingly blurred lines between professionals and managers (Broadbend, Dietrich & Roberts, 1997) is legitimizing a form of professionalism that pragmatically accepts policies and takes their efficient implementation as its fundamental purpose. Bottery (2000) describes managerialism as value placed in economic productivity; a clear and institutionalized mandate to further it; and the rational allocation of material and human resources to achieve it. Managerialism, explained by Bottery, is more than a collection of techniques; it is a distinct ideology with a profound impact on the daily life and daily activities of organizations.

From Bottery's description, it is not difficult to see a fairly straightforward application of this ideology in professional learning communities. A managerial focus places value on maximizing the efficiency of teachers' collaborative time and on providing evidence of that efficiency in the form of meeting minutes, reports, operationalized goals, and projected timelines. Site-based management on tight budgets encourages administrators to adopt this perspective. Where scarce time and money are invested to create collaborative spaces, it is not surprising when administrators assume a managerial stance and press PLC activities to prove out as a maximally productive use of school resources.

While there is an appealing degree of common sense in this sort of accountability, in the end it likely creates more problems than it solves. First and foremost, it is entirely disempowering, for it places no faith in collaborating teachers to work together effectively. The consequence for professionalism may be a "low trust" environment (Campbell, 2003; Codd 2005, p. 203; Frowe, 2005) wherein teachers' choices and behaviours are the product of control and accountability mechanisms rather than an internalized and reflective sense of professional ethics (Codd, 2005; Noddings, 2003). At its extreme – sadly, something being experienced by many US schools under NCLB, this low trust environment may extend into a full-blown climate of fear when accountability measures extend to jobs being dependent on student achievement outcomes (National Education Assocation, 2006). Low trust climates generate insularity, defensive postures, and conservatism. A low-trust climate is unlikely to engender the sort of open dialogue required to develop flourishing and effective conversations about good teaching; yet, this dialogue is described as an important feature of a professional learning community (Dufour, Eaker & Dufour, 2005; Hargreaves, 2003; Zmuda, Kuklis & Kline, 2004).

A managerial approach also focuses teachers' efforts on the means rather than the ends of their work. In his study of perceived teacher autonomy, Friedman (1999) makes a distinction between "principle" and "routine" decision-making, noting that the latter "do not deal with fundamental aspects of the organization's work and are not intended to alter the organization's basic rules in any way" (p. 62). He notes that literature around teacher autonomy tends to equate autonomy with pedagogical decision-making – a concern echoed by other authors (Ben-Peretz, 2000; Bottery & Wright, 2000). There is a danger that any latitude provided for teachers in how students are taught may result in mistaking autonomy in the area of implementation for the more significant forms of autonomy that teachers do **not** have (Ben-Peretz 2000; Bottery & Wright; 2000; McClure, 1999). Codd (2005) has further pointed out that a managerial focus lends itself strongly to standardization of outcomes. In teaching, this has taken the form of increasing use of standardized assessments, intervention models, reporting practices, and even teaching methods in the form of "best practices."

Summarily, a managerially-driven professional learning community can at best be expected to laud efficient implementation as the hallmark of teacher professionalism. I see two possible implications here, depending upon whether teachers accept or reject an ideology of managerialism. The first implication is that the professional learning community is more aptly characterized as a working group. Here, teachers may embrace – or at least grudgingly accept – that their collaborative mandate is to get things done. I consider this acceptance unfortunate. Like the proposed "teacher as scientist" model for the professional learning community, the "teacher as manager" model downplays the critical and moral dimensions of professionalism, and the aesthetic, craft dimensions of teaching. The activities of a managerially-driven professional learning community may be limited to those that best lend themselves to standardization: assessments, reporting practices, intervention protocols, and pedagogical "best practices." Anecdotes from many of our graduate students suggest that these have indeed been the foci of many developing professional learning communities in Alberta schools.

The second possibility, and a more likely one I believe, is that teachers will reject the managerial focus, and in doing so, reject the professional learning community model. This outcome would also be unfortunate, because it is the result of a mistaken conflation of the PLC model itself with the given ideology that shapes norms of professional behaviour. The latter is a choice. Teachers may fail to recognize that, driven by other choices, the professional learning community model has the potential to uplift the professional status of teaching, foster creativity and inquiry in practice, and relieve the isolation that characterizes so much of teachers' practices.

Conclusion

Principles in Action: Stories of Award-Winning Professional Development (Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning, 2000) documents two schools that used a combination of teamwork and carefully focused professional development to make significant gains in student achievement. In this video, images abound of diagnostic activities, pedagogical skill development, non-nonsense conversations among teachers, and a consummate focus on student learning. "Those teachers," I thought, as I watched, "are *professionals*." I doubt that anyone else watching the video alongside me would disagree. It was a powerful experience, and a positive one – a portrait of a staff committed – collectively – to students' success.

Would one say that such case studies exemplify professionalism? Reflect it? Create it? Colorado's Montview Elementary School has clearly done wonderful things; it was one of the two schools in this video that garnered a national award from the U.S. Department of Education. The video captures what, according to this government organization, characterizes the behaviour of staff in a successful school. Viewers will see teachers who share learning and questions openly; identify problems that students are having and work actively to solve them; engage and apply outside expertise; and focus on specific pedagogical skills to assist a large ESL student population.

Montview is a case: a documentary that shares the facts of what the school did. It is also a story: an interpretation, a representation of a principal and school staff that conduct themselves in ways that I am guessing most of us would describe as professional. There is no reason to doubt the authenticity of the school's success. Yet its experiences, as they are captured by video and interview, are necessarily storied. In the filming and editing, images, words, mood, are intentionally crafted to create a powerful normative exemplar of professional K-12 teaching -- one that is sanctioned by the U.S. Department of Education.

The Montview video illustrates one of the many ways in which teacher professionalism and professional collaboration may be constructed. It has been my contention in this chapter that trade literature and government policies related to professional learning communities create multiple constructs of professionalism within the PLC, and that to fully understand the potential and pitfalls of collaborative work in schools requires that we closely examine these varied and competing constructs. I have taken a hermeneutic turn by digging into the conceptual history of "professionalism" and have considered how past and present contextual variables of professional work may shape what we understand to be "professional" about a professional learning community. It is my hope that the exercise helps us to think more deeply and critically about the norms, values and beliefs that create and are created by teachers' collaborative work in schools.

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Chapter Four: Professional Learning Communities as Sites of Transformative Learning

The cultivation and maturation of cultures that foster effective teacher collaboration is a journey fraught with complexities that are rarely addressed meaningfully in practitioner-oriented literature. Weaving powerful narratives, positive affective language, and prescriptives into their work, "field guides" to professional learning communities may breed unrealistic expectations of the professional learning community (PLC) process. In such works, cultivating a culture of continuous collaborative learning is often reduced to linear steps and a series of technical tasks such as surveys, checklists, and bar graphs that convey an artificial sense of order to what is in fact a messy and iterative process. The stated intent is that inquiry-driven, collaborative professional learning becomes a way of life, a taken-for-granted cultural norm. Yet, ironically, we seem unable to break free of means-ends thinking even as we attempt to represent teacher (and student) learning as something more ontological and lived than "achieved."

It is little wonder that we find ourselves trapped in such situational irony when professional learning communities are judged as worthy (or not) based on student achievement as their ends; when they are expected to operate in high-stakes accountability climates; or when they otherwise fail to disrupt the instrumentality that dominates the ways we feel compelled to think about and operate schools. Given its inability to transcend these contextual and philosophical limits, we should question whether the PLC, as it is presently understood and represented, can live up to its promise of profound change for schools. To address this question requires a deeper examination of what PLCs do, or could be doing.

Inherent in the professional learning community model is the notion that teacher learning should be taking place as a result of collaboration – hence the name. But, in our present achievement and accountability-oriented political climate, this learning is understood, for the most part, as "best practices," or a body of pedagogical, technical expertise that in theory will "guarantee" positive academic outcomes for students. Studying best practices has value and utility as a form of teacher learning, but it is both an incomplete representation of collaborative processes, and an inadequate foundation for lasting school change. While improved pedagogical skills doubtless have positive impacts, an exclusive focus on the same does not promote the critical reflection required to understand PLCs – and schools – as complex social and political entities, within which many forms of "learning" take place. Lacking this level of critical reflection, we are unable to dialogue successfully toward the consensus required for improvements to be sustainable.

I make the case instead that the kind of learning required – both for individuals and the school as an organization – must be understood as transformative. Transformative learning theory proposes that the destabilization and discomfort caused by significant changes, even crises, can serve as a catalyst for profound shifts in worldview. Learning through dialogue in group settings is also integral to the transformative process, as is critical reflection.

There are two reasons why transformative learning should shape the work of the professional learning community. First, transformative learning theory captures the magnitude of challenge and potential for individual growth in collaborative settings and offers explanations about why authentic collaborative learning is so much more difficult in practice than it is on paper. Second, transformative learning informs understandings about the critical collective inquiry required for systemic change.

Transformative learning requires clear vision and persistence on the part of educational leaders, yet it is, I suggest, the only route to any sort of enduring change. It requires that teachers and administrators think deeply and critically about their own practices, the kinds of schools we want to have, and the systemic barriers that hinder our efforts. This is messy, time-consuming work that invites discord, and uncertainty – a far cry from the relatively unproblematic business of studying and implementing more effective practices. When we bring this understanding to the professional learning community model at the outset, we better our chances of persevering through challenges that must be overcome if schools are truly to be "transformed."

To develop the discussion, I point to the ways in which professional learning communities represent opportunities for genuine change in schools. Their potential, however, is undermined when we limit collaborative activities to technical work that does not encourage critical reflection. I will then examine and apply the concept of transformative learning, discussing its implications for personal and organizational change.

The Possibilities of the Professional Learning Community

The professional learning community is one model within a constellation of models and theories that are characterized by some core beliefs: 1) that staff professional development is critical to improved student learning; 2) that this professional development is most effective when it is collaborative and collegial; and 3) that this collaborative work should involve inquiry and problem solving in authentic contexts. While I focus on the professional learning community specifically for the purposes of this work, the PLC should be understood as an exemplar: I believe the discussion can also be more broadly applied to any collaborative professional development model that is characterized by these core beliefs.

Professional learning community models and their collaborative cousins are resonating with teachers and schools because they have some significant strengths. First, they call teachers to come together in some specific ways: PLCs are purposeful and authentic in that teachers, working together, examine and dialogue about the artefacts of their daily practices – lesson plans, curriculum, teaching materials, assessments tools and assessment data – and engage in critical inquiry to improve their effectiveness. I use the word "artefact" deliberately here – *art* both as "conscious production" for either aesthetic or practical purposes, and *factum*, "something made" (American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2000) – for etymologically it captures the sense that much meaning and creativity is bound up in the ordinary objects and tools of teaching[2]; these material items reflect both utility and artistry, both the nature of technical work, and something of the cultural context within which this work takes place. Because they are so ubiquitous and ordinary, they are also taken for granted. When they are collaboratively examined and revised, they take on new significance and meaning, not only for their practical use, but also for the history of culture and ideas that they represent.

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[2] From *art* both as "conscious production" for either aesthetic or practical purposes, and *factum*, "something made" The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition. Copyright © 2000 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Retrieved November 4, 2005 from http://www.bartleby.com/61/9/A0440900.html

By way of contrast, traditional professional development tends to a fascination with the new and novel. Insights, innovations and curriculum are didactically disseminated, usually out of the context of daily practice. *In situ*, changes are, for the most part, either adopted or rejected without further reflection beyond their immediate utility. Thus, in a piecemeal way, we create – or more aptly accumulate – ourselves in practice, never afforded the opportunities to reflect back upon the meanings that "new things" have taken on within our own environments. In the quest for improvement, we often overlook that inquiry is not just future-oriented, but is also an expedition into our present and our past – to extend the metaphor of the artefact, an archaeological "dig" that creates opportunities for new understandings of ourselves. In turn, these understandings form a temporal bridge, a sense of continuity in our actions and our beings. If school cultures are fragmented, poorly understood, and buffeted around by (seemingly) random political and reform initiatives, at least part of this problem can be attributed to the lack of time and space that teachers are afforded to excavate some essence of who they are – individually and collectively – from the landscape of their daily lives in schools.

The professional learning community model creates some of the time and space needed for teachers to engage in this reflection. Of equal importance, it provides focus for conversation. If better schools indeed require a complete "re-culturing" (Hawley& Valli, 1999; Hargreaves, 2004; Zmuda, Kuklis & Kline, 2004), the abstract idea of culture or context may be brought down to a more concrete and manageable level through the intentional study and improvement of tools and observable practices. This process can – and usually is – understood as technical work to improve student learning, but should also be grasped anthropologically, as a means to access, reflect upon and change a school's culture through its symbolic representations. In this way, we can connect daily practice to deeper inquiry for personal and organizational growth.

A second strength of the professional learning community is that the notion of "community" aligns with our understanding of schools as organizations that are particularly social and relational. If this were not the case, then teacher isolation would not be an enduring lament of K-12 education. Teachers would not be notorious for "teacher talk" – driving their loved ones insane with endless stories about students and fellow staff members, nor would teachers lie awake at night thinking about the students they just can't "reach." In relation to their students, committed teachers are, it is fair to say, incapable of separating the more task-oriented work of teaching the curriculum from an ethic of care that binds them to their students in relationship. And, while all organizations where people are engaged with one another necessitate that some sort of social relationships and social climate be formed, schools are characterized by a particular *kind* of relationship that is more familial, more humanistic, and perhaps even more spiritual than the relationships required for most organizations to function well.

In profit-driven organizations, the importance of these dimensions for organizational learning has oft been critiqued and dismissed by theorists and employees alike for what may be perceived as cynical efforts to leverage workers' hearts and souls to improve the bottom line (Fenwick, 1998; Foster, 1989). But in schools and other organizations where the "bottom line" is the learning, growth, and safety of our fellow human beings, the appropriateness of the caring dimension is rarely questioned. For schools, then, the intentional cultivation of "community," replete with powerful and positive shared norms and values, is a worthy effort. It is an effort that has not been adequately supported through professional development in the past.

The professional learning community, by asking teachers to work together with a common goal of improving student learning, thus taps into two powerful discourses that characterize the essence of what teachers do, yet are conspicuously absent in routine staff conversations: teaching as a conscious, practical art and teaching as relationship. These ideas shape teachers' daily realities, but lack forums for meaningful articulation. Professional development events, dominated by sage-on-the-stage "experts" or focused around technical work, provide little or no opportunity for dialogue among colleagues about the beliefs that underlie their practices. The situation is no better in the day-to-day milieu of the school. As Little (1990) suggests, most sharing among teachers amounts to hasty exchanges in the staff room that meet an immediate need: a sympathetic ear and some advice about managing a difficult student, or "it worked for me" pedagogy. Given a dearth of time, and entrenched cultural norms of individualism and isolation in schools, it is unlikely that more meaningful exchanges will occur unless they are intentionally structured into professional development and daily practice. The professional learning community offers this intentional structure, along with all of its potential for growth and change.

Professional Learning Communities & Transformative Change

Although reformation and transformation are by definition synonymous, it is the latter term that we associate with profound change. “Re-form” implies that we take a lump of clay that looks one way and shape it into something that looks different. It assumes that the essential nature of what we are working with is redeemable (O’Sullivan, 1999). Transformation, in contrast, evokes images of changing the clay itself into something else. My metaphor here (I hope) makes a distinction clear; it is the old case of form vs. substance – school change understood as something that alters appearances and functions, versus school change understood as a fundamental shift in what schools *are*. It seems to me that, when we speak of school reform, we are often unclear about whether the changes we seek are of the sort that reshape what already is, or the sort that is truly *transformative*, creating an entirely new means of public education.

This lack of distinction is certainly the case in our understanding of professional learning communities. Hyperbolic language – excellence, profundity, re-culturing, mission and vision – create a revolutionary mystique around collaborative work: the sense that we are indeed “transforming” schools into something new. It belies the fact that, in practice, PLCs and similar models are usually limited to enacting improvements in pedagogy and assessment. There is a common sense appeal to having teachers focus their professional development efforts on the “core business” of their teaching. But the enhancement of good teaching by already-committed educators should not be equated with the transformation of schools. The latter project is beyond the scope of the professional learning community in its present forms, because it requires critique and action in areas over which teachers have limited or no control: the negative impact of apathetic or hostile colleagues, weak or poor leadership by administrators, the weight of a bloated, mandated curriculum, inadequate teacher preparation and induction, negative and misinformed representations of schooling in the media, racism, poverty, and inimical government policy.

This laundry list of oppressive forces is not intended to diminish the power of excellent teaching, nor the worth of the many improvements and successes that are resulting from work in professional learning communities. Rather, I see two important questions emerging. The first is to what extent it is feasible for PLCs to live up to their promise of creating significant, systemic change in public education, or genuine *transformation*. I have suggested that collaborative activities are too limited in scope to generate any more than fairly local and ephemeral improvements that are difficult to "scale up" outside of a school or district, and are easily swept away by policy changes, budget restructuring, or changes/losses in key leadership. Local successes are not the same as systemic change. Past school reform efforts have failed precisely because they have disregarded broader social and political contexts (Bottery, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Leonardo, 2003; Rogers & Oakes, 2005).

The second question is the extent to which public education *can or should* be transformed. Are the changes we require of our schools metamorphic? The general thrust of school reform discourse, regardless of its political origins, certainly suggests that what we are doing now is perceived to be an abysmal failure – beyond "fixing" within the limits of our present understanding of what schools should be (Leonardo, 2003). The school choice movement is founded on a basic mistrust of schools to operate effectively without market-based incentives to innovate (Lubienski, 2005). Progressive and critical writers argue that schools smother the critical thinking and creativity required for democratic citizenship. No one, it seems, is happy with public education. Hargreaves (2004) observes that schools are not adequately responding to contemporary change forces like diverse student populations, increasing awareness of global disparity, eroding civic space, and the mental clutter of exponentially exploding "information."

A recent edition of the Teachers College Record, reflecting on the 50th anniversary of Brown vs. Board of Education, summarily suggests that we have far to go in the elimination of systemic racism and inequality (Rogers & Oakes, 2005). In the United States, this takes the form of the consistent underachievement and underparticipation of African American and Latino students; in Canada, the crisis of Aboriginal education has stinging parallels. Leonardo (2003) states bluntly that our schools are characterized by "grave disparities and savage inequalities" (p. 1).

In short, it is not difficult to construct a doom-and-gloom account of the many failures of public education (no matter that our schools may be held up as mirrors for society in the manner of "physician heal thyself;" Luke 4:23). Thus, it is not difficult to construct the case that deep transformation is needed. It should also be clear that such change requires our engagement with foundational questions about what our public schools can and should be contributing to the world we want. If we had consensus on these matters, public education would be easier.. But, like politics, religion, art and mass media, our schools are lightning rods for a concentration of competing beliefs, values, and epistemologies. Preoccupied as we are with the day-to-day management of schools and the practical work of teaching, we do not ponder these tensions and controversies, nor do we create forums within which they can be articulated and discussed. I have proposed that there are possibilities in professional learning communities to create such forums, if we choose to use them in a conscious and political manner.

I have also made the case that teachers must understand professional collaboration this way if it is to have a transformative impact. We expect our schools to solve social problems and resolve political tensions (Darling Hammond, 1997; Tyack & Cubin, 1995) yet do not acknowledge the extent to which the solutions must themselves be more broadly social and political than the technical work that dominates teacher professional development. As an alternative, transformative learning has both personal and organizational dimensions, but is characterized at its core as the critical work of examining what is taken-for-granted, and recognizing before-unseen possibilities for change. If teacher collaboration is to foster improvement that lives up to its rhetoric, professional learning communities must be understood and cultivated as sites of transformative learning. As a process of individual change, transformative learning has a well-developed body of theory in adult learning. As a broader process of social change, transformative learning draws from the critical tradition.

Transformative Learning for Personal Change

Transformative learning theory has been underutilized in school reform discourse, at least as it applies to individuals. When we speak of "transformation" it is usually as a transformation of the school or the school culture, not transformation of the individual.

Yet school improvement literature defines teachers' learning as a lynchpin of any potential progress (Guskey, 2000; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Louis, Marks & Kruse, 1996). It makes sense, then, to consider the extent to which teachers themselves must undergo transformation for substantive and sustainable change to occur.

The value of considering this question is twofold. First, it is a means to help us to more fully consider the possibilities and limits of the change that can be expected to result from collaborative learning. Second, it helps us understand why the establishment of a professional learning community is so much more challenging than what first meets the eye. To explore these issues, I here take some time to more fully describe the processes and dimensions of transformative learning theory, and then apply this theory to the work of professional learning communities, looking specifically at the impact of individual learning on the success of collaborative endeavours.

Transformative Learning Theory

It is not possible within the scope of this work to do justice to the full scope of transformative learning theory, although a brief overview is helpful for distinguishing what transformative learning is from what it is not. As Brookfield (2000) suggests, when transformation is "indiscriminately attached to any practice we happen to approve of… [it] loses any descriptive or definitional utility" (p. 140). Brookfield takes issue with the widespread misuse of the term, which, he argues, should be understood as Mezirow's original theory of adult learning intended it: a deep and profound altering of one's world view, an "epiphanic or apocalyptic cognitive event" (Brookfield, 2000, p. 139). Therefore, in a school improvement climate where vague references to "transformative leadership" and "transformed school culture" are not uncommon, Mezirow's transformative learning framework is a useful way to organize and delimit our expectations of the individual learning that takes place in professional learning communities, and its role on the larger stage of overall school improvement.

Jack Mezirow (1978) brought the idea of transformative learning to adult learning theory with his seminal "Perspective Transformation." Studying adult women returning to college, Mezirow articulated a process whereby a disorienting experience – often a major life change or crisis – raises critical awareness of one's "meaning perspective," prompting learning that leads to a fundamental shift in the learner's self-concept and worldview: a transformation. While the process is, in most cases, much more iterative and incremental than linear in nature (Cranton, 2002; Taylor, 1998), transformative learning does follow a general pattern, wherein the learner, through some activating event, becomes aware that his existing assumptions are ineffective or problematic. Critical reflection follows, along with exposure to alternative points of view. The learner then reintegrates, incorporating new knowledge and perspectives into a transformed worldview. The extent to which this personal transformation leads to action for social change has been a source of great debate, although Mezirow himself, like other critical adult educators, sees this as a desirable outcome (1995).

Because discourse is a core tenet of transformative learning theory, a social context for learning is inherent. Learners are not "transformed" in isolation; as Brookfield (1995) observes, the most critical and self-aware among us still have blind spots, and require observations, insights and challenges from others to identify these. The dynamics of these exchanges are, however, complex, and the social context of transformative learning can be viewed from a number of perspectives. Given Mezirow's own emphasis on dialectics, one perspective stresses *reason and rationality*. Mezirow, like Habermas, by whom his work is greatly influenced, maintains the modernists' faith in the powers of critical dialogue for solving problems and distilling consensual truths. Multiple voices and perspectives are required to draw out and examine our individual, foundational beliefs and assumptions, or, as Mezirow terms them, our "meaning perspectives." Here, group members serve as a sounding board for one another's propositions, and coach one another toward authentic, reasoned, and persuasive discourse. For Mezirow, the cultivation of sound reasoning and democratic participation skills is essential, both for an individual's personal growth and learning, and for his or her contributions to social transformation. It is, in keeping with his applications of Habermas' theory of communicative action, also an essential condition of authentic discourse (Mezirow, 1995).

A second social dimension of transformative learning can be explored through our *subjective experiences of critical discourse*. While learners interact in a group, the psychological impact of the learning is, for each individual, unique. In turn, each individual's learning experiences will have an impact on the dynamics of the learning group. Mezirow's early theory recognized the individual's role in constructing his or her own meanings, and articulated the processes by which these meanings are explored and transformed. Mezirow also acknowledged the extent to which challenges to our meaning perspectives create psychological vulnerability, necessitating a high level of trust and respect among group members (1995). Some critics, however, have argued convincingly that Mezirow has not given enough credence to the many contextual layers of learning, including individual histories, the learning group as a context, and the wider contexts of organizations and socio-political conditions (Clark & Wilson, 1991).

Transformative learning is thus much more than a rational undertaking; rather, it is highly personal and affective. Learning has intuitive, non-rational, creative and even spiritual dimensions that play significant roles in the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of our meaning perspectives (Grabove, 1997; Taylor, 1998). Thus it can be argued that Mezirow does not sufficiently problematize learner complexity, and learner vulnerability, relying too much on the powers of reason and rationality to guide discourse and buffer potentially difficult emotions. Adult educator Dorothy Mackeracher (2004) claims that we have a tremendous investment in our representation of ourselves to ourselves, in the world views we construct for ourselves, and the beliefs that we hold about our places in it. Not infrequently, challenges to our deeply held beliefs represent a threat to our integrity that can be met with hostility, denial, or distress.

Transformative learning theory proposes that this distress can serve as a catalyst for significant personal and professional growth. Ideally, this growth is supported by critical friends in a psychologically safe group setting. However, it is also important to recognize and anticipate the potential negative outcomes for those who simply do not want their meaning perspective to be challenged. In turn, these individuals can create distress and antagonism in the learning group. Conversely, it is unlikely that individual possibilities for transformation can be realized in a dysfunctional social setting. For better or worse, the affective states of individuals and the climate of the group as a whole are mutually influential.

A final and more contested social dynamic of transformative learning is the extent to which it requires or inspires *critical engagement with the social world*. Transformative learning theory has been faulted, especially by critical theorists, for over-emphasizing self-development and under-emphasizing action for social change (Brookfield, 2000; Inglis, 1997; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). At its worst, transformative learning can be perceived as self-indulgent "navel gazing," that offers little in the way of improving the world. Mezirow, however, argues that social transformation depends upon and is largely preceded by individual transformation (1995).

Post-structuralists have further suggested that Mezirow's work has not adequately accounted for unequal power relations within learning groups (Clark & Wilson, 1991; Pietrykowksi, 1998). Participants may be marginalized by race, class, gender, sexuality, or some other form of difference that renders them less able to voice their beliefs and concerns according to Habermas' "ideal speech situation," in which all participants in a dialogue have equal voice and power, and are free from either self-imposed or externally imposed conditions that distort or impair an individual's ability to participate fully and democratically in reasoned discourse. According to post-structural perspectives, transformative learning and its group context must be understood within larger social and political contexts. It should help learners articulate the relative strengths and weaknesses of their own and other's positionalities and to take action to rectify unjust and oppressive conditions (Wooltorton, 2004).

Mezirow's take on transformative learning theory still tends to focus on the individual, much in keeping with his own unapologetic belief that adult learning should render learners increasingly capable of autonomous, rational, and rigorously self-scrutinized thinking (Mezirow, 2000). This perspective has been challenged and enriched, however, by scholars who emphasize the social and affective dynamics of transformative learning, including the role of the transformative adult educator, the characteristics and behaviours of learning groups, and the impact of broader social and political considerations. As a result, we can conceptualize transformative learning systemically and holistically, examining not only the individual psychology of transformation, but also its dialectical relationship with the larger learning context.

Communicative Learning in Professional Learning Communities

From this brief foray into transformative learning theory, it should be apparent that its tenets have much in common with the characteristics of an ideal professional learning community. The two share an emphasis on critical reflection, the use of dialogue in group settings, and a mandate for transformative change. We should also now be able to appreciate that the general idea of transformation, both of the individual teacher-learner and the larger school environment, has resonance with the professional learning community model, but has been under-conceptualized.

Transformative learning theory can enhance an understanding of PLCs in significant ways. One is the discernment of the sorts of learning that we are actually doing in collaboration. The problem with professional learning communities is that they largely focus on instrumental learning, yet anticipate – if a fundamental change in school culture is truly desired – the transformative impact of communicative learning. This is not unlike hoping that one's cat will produce a litter of puppies. Transformative learning theory can help us to address this problem by shifting emphasis away from collaborative teacher learning as merely a more social setting for the mastery of technical skills, to a communicative framework that is a more appropriate for exploiting any transformative potential that might be present in a professional learning community model.

Mezirow's application of Habermas' tripartite representation of human communication is helpful here, for he makes a clear distinction between instrumental learning that is focused on goal-oriented behaviour, and communicative learning that stresses understanding:

> Instrumental learning involves…controlling or manipulating the environment or other people. It involves predictions about observable events which can be proven correct, determining cause-effect relationships, and task-oriented problem solving….Communicative learning….involves understanding values, ideals, feelings, and normative concepts about freedom, autonomy, love, justice, goodness, responsibility, wisdom, and beauty (Mezirow, 1995).

Most of the PLC activity that I am familiar with through my own study, and through my engagement with Alberta's AISI school improvement projects, involves curriculum mapping, collaborative development of lessons and assessment tools, analysis of student achievement data, and the implementation and assessment of new teaching strategies. These are not bad or wasteful activities. In fact, AISI reports suggest positive impacts on students and teachers alike. But the focus is, by Mezirow's definition, clearly instrumental, keeping teachers locked into a hypothetical-deductive mindset, and focused on relatively short-term goals. Further, there is no guarantee that changes in practice reflect teachers' understandings of the philosophies behind them (Thompson & Zeuli, 1999). It is fair to raise doubt about the sustainability of any changes that are taking place, encouraging as some of them are.

In contrast, communicative learning, as Mezirow describes it, is an interpretive act that addresses the foundational questions we need to ask if our task-oriented behaviour is to be guided by shared norms and values, which in turn, by all accounts, is critical to the sustainability of a collaborative culture. Transformative learning requires that teachers be willing and able to critically explore, articulate, negotiate, and revise their beliefs about themselves, their students, their colleagues, and their schools. It requires that teacher-learners move beyond content and process reflection to *premise* reflection, or the examination of the foundations of their *meaning perspectives* (Mezirow, 1995) or worldviews. It is only through this level of self-awareness that teachers can, in turn, understand the foundational perspectives of their colleagues, and critically evaluate not just the content and processes of proposed practices, but the philosophies that underlie them, and their potential long-term consequences. In this way, transformative learning theory locates the foundations of systemic transformation in the transformed educational visions of individual practitioners. The collaborative setting serves as the context and catalyst for personal transformation.

To encourage communicative learning in teachers thus requires at least a partial change in the focus of collaborative time toward more open-ended dialogue. It is a change that, in a climate where accountability reigns supreme, I fear will not take place. So long as "data-driven decision-making" and "focus on student learning" are made the exclusive concentration of collaborative work – and this concentration is almost entirely unquestioned in mainstream school improvement literature, we cannot expect much time or energy to be dedicated to the sort of critical reflection Mezirow advocates for transformative learning. This is an egregiously short-sighted and impoverished use of collaborative dynamics, for it forecloses on possibilities for the technical aspects of teacher learning to serve as a foundation or complement to communicative dialogue. If Mezirow is correct that both instrumental and communicative forms of learning can be connected (2000), we needn't forsake one for the other; yet through fear, pragmatism, or a sheer lack of knowing any better, this is precisely what many do.

Transformation, Dissent, and Psychic Risk

A further door to understanding opened by transformative learning theory is its emphasis on the psychology of profound personal change. It is a gift to recognize that significant learning is "threatening, emotionally charged, and extremely difficult" (Mezirow, 1995), for this insight can liberate us from the sorts of strategic blindness and defensiveness that keep us, as organizations and individuals, stuck in self-perpetuating dysfunctional patterns that actively work *against* change (Argyris, 2004). For schools, this recognition answers the question of why professional learning communities are so difficult to establish and maintain.

I have remained fascinated by the gap between the eloquence of the professional learning community model on paper and its messiness in practice. I am fascinated by our seeming inability to anticipate and address this gap in our implementation efforts. Its critical manifestations appear to be the barriers created by dissent and resistance. We have seen the enemy, and it is us. Leonard and Leonard (2005) conclude that, despite concerted collaborative efforts and voluminous school improvement literature attesting to PLC merits, the attainment of a full and sustainable culture of collaborative teaching and learning has experienced "limited success," and remains "at best difficult, at worst doubtful" (p. 25). In Alberta, AISI school improvement reports submitted to the province's Education ministry consistently lament the problems posed by lack of "buy in" on the part of resistant teachers and administrators (Taylor, Servage, McRae & Parsons, 2006). The difficulty of bridging diverse and specialized interests, particularly in high schools, has been well documented (Fullan and Hargreaves, 1996; Louis, Marks & Kruse, 1997). Achinstein (2002) addresses collaboration problems from a much underutilized micropolitical perspective, examining the ways in which power operates within and amongst groups to undermine consensus and collective action. Rusch (2005) provides an interesting study that illustrates how jealousy, competition and politics in school districts undermine the "scaling up" of promising school improvements.

While the dearth of time and resources for collaboration should not be overlooked as barriers to change, it does appear that the sorts of problems that stymie effective collaboration are, at least in part, the terribly human kind – failure is the collective consequence of our individual weaknesses, our individual choices, our individual insecurities, our individual fear of change, our individual quests for power. Yet we tend to reify and depersonalize resistance to change in school improvement literature, as if it were a force "out there" to be overcome by effective and persistent leadership. The error of this approach is its technical and systemic take on what is better understood as affective and personal – our own our own less than gracious individual responses the psychic risk posed by transformative change.

To appreciate the extent of this risk requires that we recognize teachers' collaboration for the radical proposition that it is. Teaching, always characterized as a psychologically isolated and isolating activity, is suddenly made not only a much more public undertaking, but a publicly threatening one, as teachers are asked to lay bare their assumptions, strengths and weaknesses before their colleagues. And, the more that collaborative work tends toward the sort of communicative dialogue required for authenticity and sustainability, the more likely it is to generate challenges to teachers' identity integrity. Drawing from Argyris & Schoen (1978), Mitchell & Sackney (2000) emphasize practitioners' frequent misalignments of espoused theory and theory in practice. The inability to detect discord between espoused theory and actual practices represents a major barrier to effective communication about improved practices. It is also, as Mitchell & Sackney point out, a highly personal and sometimes traumatic process to have these inconsistencies brought to light. Argyris (2004) observes, "Asking human beings to alter their theory-in-use is asking them to question the foundation of their sense of competence and self-confidence" (p. 10).

It is no wonder that the collaborative endeavour is threatening, and it is no surprise when it fails if the PLC is regarded as a dispassionate hypothetical-deductive task set. When attention is focused on technical work alone, we fail to address the underlying social and emotional dimensions of learning and working in groups.

Transformative learning theory attends to these dimensions because transformative pedagogy not only premises, but proposes to work constructively with learners' vulnerabilities in the face of challenging ideas. Critical dialogue in a transformative setting uses dissent to help learners understand themselves, and each other. Such practices confirm the belief among many that dissent is a healthy and necessary part of community building (Achinstein, 2002; Hargreaves, 2004), but transformative learning theory goes further by explaining *how and why* dissent is healthy. Transformative learning theory also works to cultivate the discourse skills required to use conflict and disagreement as tools for critical inquiry and reflection in group settings.

Interestingly, the facilitation of this sort of learning have been an ongoing concern in the field of adult learning, as adult educators wrestle with the ethical implications of directing learners' "disorienting dilemmas" for educative purposes, the skills required to help groups to engage in critically reflective discourse, and the limits of their agency to induce personal and social transformation (Knights, 1993; Taylor, 1998). The relative inattention to these matters in the equally complex environment of teachers' collaborative groups suggests that schools have been rather naïve in their expectations that a harmonious collegial culture will emerge simply from an unsubstantiated notion that diverse perspectives can be corralled under the deceptively common sense moral imperative of a "focus on student learning."

Transformative Learning for Systemic Change: The Role of Critical Theory

A perennial problem with transformative learning theory is its ambiguous relationship to critical theory (Taylor, 1998) or, to rephrase the problem as it was stated earlier, the relationship between individual transformation and social transformation. Mezirow's own affinity for emancipatory learning is evident in his incorporation of Freirian *conscientization* and his hope that transformative learning can further individuals' abilities to ascertain and overcome sources of oppression and distortion that impair complete and equal democratic participation in society (Mezirow, 1995). However, on several grounds, Mezirow resists a full embrace of critical emancipatory learning (Taylor, 1998). Mezirow is concerned that critical emancipatory learning may impose its own ideologies – a practice counter to his emphasis on the importance of learner rationality and autonomy (1995). Further, Mezirow and other critical educators have suggested that different skill sets and intentions underlie education and social action, so it is not always in our best interests to conflate the two (Brookfield, 2000).

Mezirow's unease with emancipatory learning still creates a theoretical problem or inconsistency, however. He believes that personal transformation should lead to social action (1995), yet without venturing into critical emancipatory dimensions in the transformative learning framework, there can be no guarantees that arrived-upon personal transformations will lead to tangible efforts to live and act in accordance with the new meaning perspective. As critics have asked, can we rightly call a change "transformative" if it does not manifest itself in tangible social action? What, then, is the proper place of education for emancipation?

The "education of the educator" confounds this problem of praxis even further. The student may have some latitude of choice, as Mezirow suggests, about the extent to which his personal transformations will lead to some sort of social action (1995); but, for the educator, teaching itself is *unavoidably* a social act. Teaching or facilitating, the act of shaping an educative experience for others, brings with it distinct powers and responsibilities that make it impossible to separate personally transformative learning experiences from their impacts on the social context and power dynamics of the classroom. It can be argued, then, that as educators we do not have the luxury of stopping short at communicative learning for personal transformation. We are necessarily led to emancipatory learning that considers the broader socio-political contexts and consequences of our actions. Critical pedagogy presses teachers to reclaim these dimensions of teaching and learning.

Collaboration and the Case for Critical Pedagogy

For the purposes of school change, the necessity of the emancipatory dimension of transformative learning poses the problem of determining to what extent the content of PLC discourse should examine the premises of schooling itself. When teachers dialogue about their meaning perspectives, how far should their insights venture into critical territory, questioning the very ideologies that constitute the stubborn "grammar" of public education (Tyack & Cubin, 1995) and the socio-political conditions that render access to education and cultural capital unequal and unjust?

If we are content to limit professional learning community work to improving what we already do in schools by improving pedagogy, curriculum and assessment, we can be content with the activities that most PLCs are engaged in today: a reformation of the same "clay" or stuff of schools. We can recognize and accept some limitations, and focus realistically on what is within our control, using the professional learning community model to bring together like-minded teachers who have a genuine interest in improving student learning by improving their teaching practices.

In my mind, however, this good work still leaves many questions unanswered, and many problems unaddressed. Teachers can improve standardized exam results, but cannot seem to educate the public about the narrowness of the learning represented therein. Teachers can streamline the curriculum they deliver, but they cannot challenge its content, nor the stifling quantity of what is mandated. Teachers can improve and differentiate pedagogy to reach more diverse student populations, but cannot ameliorate the effects of poverty and racism in their larger communities. In short, the perennial and systemic problems of education remain outside the scope of teachers' improvement efforts, whatever forms these take.

These problems can seem overwhelming; thus there is always a temptation to reduce critique to condemnation. When one speaks of "being critical," it is generally equated with being negative, finding fault, or denunciating. In academic discourse, the critical theorist/pedagogist must dig his heels in deeply to avoid the slide into philosophical obscurantism, or worse yet the self-assumed role of "knowing better" than those who, lacking the wisdom revealed in the Marxist tradition, remain mired in their own false consciousness. Neither approach is likely to win the widespread support of practitioners. In the latter case, the act of critique is one of merely replacing "bad" or unenlightened ideological content with "good," rendering pedagogy distinctly *un*critical, or inspiring earnest young teachers to ask their Grade Two students to reflect on European colonialism instead of colouring Thanksgiving turkeys (Ayers, Mitchie & Rome, 2004).

Such practices are akin to doing needlework with power tools. The critical pedagogy, bound up as it is in critiques of liberal capitalism, can equate resistance with hegemonic warfare. It should instead be understood as a process of discovering our hidden assumptions, evaluating the worth of what we are doing now, and imagining possibilities for the future. “Resistance” is, in this sense, not an *ipso facto* condemnation of the status quo, but a tool we use to understand our position within our larger social and political contexts. We “resist” when we find creative ways to challenge what we think we already know, what we believe to be inevitable, in ways that foster authentic critical dialogue. It is in this manner that I use the terms “critical pedagogy,” and “critical thinking:” for this particular work, and more generally as a pre-requisite or co-requisite of transformative learning and transformative praxis. This is also, I believe, consistent with Mezirow’s position on the role of critical reflection in transformative learning.

Mezirow and others have also stressed that such critical dialogue requires both time and psychologically safe “space” – conditions that have, to date, been relatively absent in teachers’ continuing professional development. Here we may consider the potential of the professional learning community to serve as a means of transformative, critical pedagogy; for, within the model, this time and space is embedded and given some priority – a distinct – if fledgling – shift in the structure of the North America school day. And, while not all schools are characterized by warm and trusting collegiality required for authentic and transformative dialogue, the professional learning community model has provided a way to focus on its importance as a precondition to change and to delimit the project of change.

Conclusion

I confess that I lack faith in the eventuality of systemic transformative change, but I am neither cynical nor without hope. In my eyes, schools, like other social institutions, remain in a dynamic equilibrium of mediocrity because, in our human weakness, we are unable to rise above our self-interest enough to work consistently toward the ideals of social democracy. However, our humanness also compels us to live purposefully, and ideals create purpose in our hearts and our minds.

The ideal speech situation, formulated by Habermas and outlined by Mezirow, requires that participants are able to deliberate and reach consensus unfettered by oppressive conditions and distortions in their own thinking. When we review ideal conditions for discourse as outlined by Mezirow, it is quickly apparent that the authentic critical dialogue we need for school transformation is an elusive ideal. This challenge does not need to discourage us from pursuing the ideal, but should help us to more realistically assess the barriers that prevent us from realizing the sorts of schools we want, to address those barriers that are within our control, and perhaps even to challenge the barriers that lie – for the time being – beyond our control.

Should we choose, the time and space for dialogue created by the professional learning communities can further these goals. Brookfield (2000) is compelling in his caution that critical pedagogy without community can lead to an "energy sapping, radical pessimism" (p. 145). Teachers need to use their collaborative time to engage one another in hopeful, critical, and creative dialogue. Herein lie the seeds of public schools that are truly "transformed."

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Chapter Five: Professional Learning Utopia

This final chapter in my thesis considers the professional learning community as a utopian construct. Because professional learning is, according to the PLC model, actually situated in a *community*, it necessarily acquires temporal and spatial conditions of interaction and is expressed in social relationships that are in turn mediated by norms, values, and accepted practices. In short, my premise is that the professional learning community – especially given the transformative promise ascribed to it in school improvement literature (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Retallick, 1999; Zmuda, Kuklis & Kline, 2004) – bears many similarities to model societies described in utopian (and dystopian) literatures.

By studying the PLC as a utopian proposition, I hope to come away with some concluding thoughts on a theme that has been woven throughout this thesis, and, by my way of thinking, underpins not just the professional learning community model, but all school improvement or school reform efforts. That theme is the struggle to develop discourses about school improvement that are, at once, critical enough to be effective and hopeful enough to support creativity, progress and energy in educators' efforts to, essentially, "do good in the world." Utopian literature is characterized by similar dialectics of hope and critique. So, it is my own hope that the analogy might provide some tools and insights not into school improvement itself, but how it is experienced in the hearts and minds of educators.

Introduction

When I began my work on this thesis two years ago, I was fascinated by the ways in which the PLC model – specifically its early iterations in the work of Dufour and Eaker (1998) seemed to capture the hope and imagination of teachers I talked to. In my thesis introduction, I mentioned my ongoing, informal exposure to thinking about professional learning communities "in the field" through my work with the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) and through the conversations and writings of graduate students in the University of Alberta's M.Ed. (Educational Studies) program for practicing teachers and administrators.

Over time, through these connections, I have observed some evolution of PLC initiatives in Alberta schools. Certainly they are becoming more widespread, as school districts are increasing mandating their use. Optimism and idealism around the potentially transformative impact of the PLC model now rests alongside cynicism and political wrangling on some fronts, a few success stories, and broadly, a genuine uncertainty about how to translate what "looks good on paper" into a workable and scalable means of school improvement.

From this perspective I now revisit my early questions about the place of hope in school improvement. I have wondered whether the hope that some teachers, administrators and AISI project leaders hold out for PLCs is naïve. I have sometimes suspected that it is. Yet I have been all too conscious that the experience of hope itself is to be honoured and nurtured. Methodologically, I have thus sought an approach that, while critical of "knee-jerk" optimism, also respects our human need to project our dreams of a better world ever forward. Without such hope, we "lose our humanity"; we die (Sargent, 2006, p. 12). Consequently, the analysis I offer here considers both the power and the pitfalls of utopian thought in school improvement.

What is Utopia, Anyway?

Howard Ozman's (1969) anthology of the place of education in utopian societies begins with the problem of defining what a "utopia" is. He concludes that definitions are almost as varied as is utopian literature itself. Utopias are nostalgic recollections of golden ages; visions of the future – whether fantastically or earnestly proposed; or, as Villoro (2006) and Sargent (2006) describe, ideological justifications of the present. Utopias may be playful acts of imagination; dire warnings in the forms of dystopian nightmare societies; satirical critiques of a present world; or even intentional blueprints for change. And, while most utopian societies or communities live only in the imagination, human history is littered with actual attempts to create them (Villoro, 2006).

A working definition...

However utopian communities or societies differ in their intents and manifestations, they tend to share commonalities that allow us to identify "utopian thought" or a utopian genre. First and foremost, utopian thought captures modernist notions of humanism, progressive history, and our ability to manipulate our world and fashion our own destiny (Ozman, 1969). Utopian thinking must begin with recognition of human potential to envision, plan and create an ideal social order. Lacking this imaginative ability to project our collective selves into some sort of future or altered ideal state, neither utopia nor its dystopian perversions could exist in our consciousness. In pursuit of the ideal, we call this imaginative projection "hope," whether fought for, realized, or lost.

Utopias are also radical. They propose that present conditions must be transcended for the utopian vision to be realized. As Ozman (1969) explains, utopia presumes that "the great social problems of a society cannot be solved without changing the entire structure of the society" (p. ix). Inherent in the utopian vision, then, is a radical critique of the status quo, and a proposed transcendence or transformation. It is not enough to "tinker" toward change; what we know must be fundamentally altered – sometimes violently deconstructed.

Because utopia is a theoretical place in which a material world is ordered through social relations and social practices, utopian thought is necessarily political. A utopia is a proposed means of distributing society's resources – power and material – in a just way. Thus inherent in utopia is a judgement of what is moral and just, about moral and just ways to distribute power and resources in society.

Summarily, a "utopia" may – at least for our immediate purposes – be defined as an imagined community or society that portrays humanity as having overcome all barriers to "the good life." Utopia is a world without want – materially, psychologically, and spiritually. It is also a world in which perceived injustices or inequalities among human beings have been rectified and laid to rest. A utopia is moral because it reflects a judgment of what constitutes goodness, and justice. A utopia is political because it entails an ordering of social systems and the material world to achieve its ends. Because a utopia can escape historicity, it may propose radical changes to an existing state of affairs, without necessarily delving into how such changes are to be realized.

Unacknowledged utopianism and its political consequences...

To understand the impact of utopian thinking on school improvement activities does not require only a definition of utopia *per se*; it is also important to grasp of the richness and breadth of the utopian genre, and the depth to which it shapes our sense of hope. This is not an aesthetic exercise, but a critical one, with political consequences. As many authors have pointed out, the supreme paradox of utopia is its inherent dogmatism, hence its ironic potential to incite tyranny and revolutionary violence in the name of creating a better world (Lancaster, 2000; Sargent, 2006; Villoro, 2006). Unchecked or unrecognized, utopian impulses can thus have dire consequences.

It seems fairly unlikely that the overt revolutionary violence of the French or Russian variety is an immediate threat in North American schools. It is not, however, too much of a stretch to propose that idealistic aims in education have historically generated more subtle and institutionalized forms of violence: for example, the enduring inequalities of race and class embedded in schooling (Apple, 2000; Rogers & Oakes, 2005); the impact of past social engineering on black, immigrant and Aboriginal children or children with disabilities (Tyack & Cuban, 1995); or, as I later take up, dehumanizing, present-day vocationalism and instrumentalism, reflecting a zealous embrace of unfettered global capitalism (Bottery, 2000; McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2001).

A less alarming but still potent critique of utopian thought follows Marx's original derision of it as ineffectual and naïve (Anderson, 2006; Lancaster, 2000; Sargent, 2006). For Halpin (2003) public education has been injured by this rejection of utopian thought. We are unable to use utopian dreaming either to project ourselves into a more hopeful future for schools, or to acknowledge what he sees as a present education system fraught with a sense of despair. I believe that Halpin's call for a revival of "utopian imagination" is worth considering. Because school improvement literature is so thoroughly pre-occupied with pragmatics -- the problems of implementation and sustainability and accountability – educators too may dismiss the significance of visioning work or simply fail to find the time to engage in it in any more than the most cursory way (Halpin, 2003).

Thus, as educators, if we do not recognize ourselves as we dream or if we are unable to articulate where our own utopian visions reside in relation to our beliefs, values and politics, we risk disturbing outcomes. The first outcome is either an active or unwitting perpetuation of institutionalized violence by enactments of ideologically rigid school reform efforts. More simply put, if we do not recognize our hopes and beliefs when they are utopian and potentially dogmatic as a consequence, we may, in our conviction that we know what is "right," run roughshod over dissenters instead of hearing them out. The second potential outcome of unconscious utopianism is described by Halpin (2003) and has, I believe, painful resonance in teachers' cynical dismissal of education "fads:" It is that, un-nurtured and unprotected, all forms of utopian dreaming are smothered and, with them, the creativity and hope we need for our schools.

Utopian Currents in School Improvement Literature

I have developed a working definition of utopia, and suggested that our ability to recognize and define our own utopian thinking has political consequences in terms of our approaches to school improvement. But, such a proposition presupposes that our school improvement efforts are, in fact, identifiably utopian. At face value, this may appear to contradict my earlier suggestion that educators are inclined to pay little attention to utopian sorts of idealism, faced as they are with the oppressive pragmatics of daily minutiae in an under-resourced and over-standardized system of education.

However, I propose that the "busy work" of endless educational initiatives is actually driven by utopian dreaming that hovers somewhere just beneath consciousness but can be located in our languaging of school reform. Much has been written about the vocation – the "calling" – of the educator, the ethic of care (Noddings, 2005), and the inherent morality and dignity of doing good work in schools (Sergiovanni, 1994; Starratt, 1994). Michael Fullan reflects a common and powerful faith in education when he states that "a strong public education system [is] the cornerstone of a civil, prosperous and democratic society (Fullan, 2003, p. 3). In 1995, Tyack & Cuban referred to American faith in education as "almost a secular religion" (p. 1). If public education is indeed imbued, even to some extent, with a religious-like power to save us from ourselves, it seems natural to extend our vision of this faith in utopian terms.

To tease out the validity of this proposition, I examined a sample of school improvement literature related to professional learning communities or other similar collaborative professional development models. Specifically, I looked at the use of the narrative form in illustrative scenarios and case studies. Like the power of affect in literary works generally, the storied nature of the following passages taps imaginative and emotional dimensions in our conceptualization of school improvement.

Linda Lambert's popular Leadership Capacity for School Improvement, for example, offers the following vision:

> The principal shared power *skillfully* with teachers, parents, community members, and students. *Effective* faculty meetings, a leadership team with a broad range of members, study groups, and vertical learning communities had created a collaborative environment where relationships could *flourish* and educators could sharpen their skills. Faculty members asked each other hard questions and provided one another with feedback....questions and concerns were subject to *thoughtful* dialogue and [were] *thoroughly* investigated. Peer coaching and reflective practices...regularly resulted in *novel* approaches to problems....Students found an *engaging* and *supportive* learning environment....[T]hey felt *valued* as contributing members of the community (2003, p. 9; emphases mine).

Fullan (2003) cites this case study of a successful improvement effort:

> The end result as we concluded our fieldwork...was the formation of a *cohesive* school community organized around a *genuine* regard for children....As we exited Holiday School, we felt *optimistic* about its enlarged capacity to undertake *serious* improvement work. A faculty community – *willing* to take risks and commit extra effort to improve – had formed. They *trusted* their principal and *enjoyed* widespread parental support (Schneider, 2002, cited in Fullan, 2003, p. 37; emphases mine).

Dufour and Eaker (1998) make extensive use of utopian narrative to describe the potential benefits of professional learning communities. This extract describes the first experiences of a novice teacher:

> After introductions, the principal spent the morning explaining the history of the school. She *carefully* reviewed the school's *vision* statement, pointing out that it had been *jointly* developed by the faculty, administration, community members, and students.... Connie spent the afternoon with her department chair and [her mentor] Jim. *Together* they provided Connie with an overview of the entire scope

> and sequence of the…department's curriculum….Connie was surprised and *pleased* to learn that [a] back to school *celebration* was an annual tradition planned and *orchestrated* by a faculty committee (pp. 30-33; emphases mine).

In some narratives, practices are described in a present progressive verb tense, creating a timeless quality of continuous action. The impression created is that the schools featured in these narratives are not only positive and effective, but are consistently and progressively so. This technique is evident in Zmuda, Kuklis & Kline's (2004) description of a *competent system*:

> The school as a *competent* system has a *shared vision* that articulates a *coherent* picture of what the school will look like when its core beliefs are put into practice. It collects and synthesizes information on student achievement, identifies the gaps between current and *desired* performance, explores research and *best practices* to identify possible strategies or frameworks to enhance teacher practice, and then chooses an *innovation* or a bundles set of innovations to close the gap between where the school is and where it has to be to *fulfill its vision*….Staff members *emerge* as a professional learning community, *embracing* collective accountability as the only way to achieve the *shared* vision for all students (p. 1; emphases mine).

Hargreaves (2003) describes eight-year old Blue Mountain School as "a school that has operated from the outset on the principles of a learning organization and a learning community" (p. 127). Hargreaves fleshes out this narrative with vivid details of the school's innovative layout and programming:

> Leaders model 'systems thinking'….Teachers also model 'systems thinking' in classrooms when school issues are discussed….Many of the *highly dedicated* and *enthusiastic* staff are omnivores of personal and professional learning outside school as well as within it….The nature of Blue Mountain as an *effective* learning organization is reflected in many different aspects of its *creation* and its continuing operation: the nature and distribution of leadership; its goals and *vision*; the organization of curriculum and teaching; its *innovative* structures and processes; and the teachers' orientation to personal and professional learning (2003, p. 129; emphases mine).

Halpin (2003) describes the successful leadership of a British school in the hands of "solution driven" and "highly professional" principal Maire Symons, who's professional values include "doing one's best for all children irrespective of their backgrounds and measured abilities" (p. 82). Halpin continues:

> [Maire] encourages risk-taking among staff, being receptive to staff experimentation, while keeping a watchful eye out for any unintentional negative consequences of their *enthusiasms*….It is noticeable how often she takes time out to say 'thank you'….During staff briefing she rarely fails to…draw attention to…the effort of an individual member of staff or group….[M]eetings chaired…minimize the transactional and *maximize the transformational*…she *builds* leadership capacity by acknowledging the expertise of others to whom she routinely hands control of the meeting (pp. 80-85; emphases mine).

What do these scenarios have in common? Most make extensive use of positive modifiers that generate a progressive and euphoric tone. They emphasize intellectually and emotionally rewarding, cooperative, and creative social exchanges. In "building," "creating," and "visioning," they reflect the modernist utopian's faith in humanity's power to shape its own destiny. Some of the stories have heroes – Halpin's (2003) "Maire," Dufour & Eaker's (1998) "Connie," and Lambert's (2003) "Jennifer." The flatness of these characters enhances their iconic quality and creates a near-universal portal through which readers can "step into their shoes" and vicariously experience the presented scenes. These stories further provide the detail required to engage the imagination of the reader. Imagination helps the readers transcend the particulars of their own professional experiences to experience a utopian school in which the perennial problems of education have, once and for all, been resolved.

The works I have used are drawn from practitioner-oriented school improvement literature. While they may ground themselves to some extent in academic theory and research, they are not intended for academic audiences and they are generally prescriptive: they provide a rationale for a school improvement initiative and the means to take action toward its implementation. They are written to engage practicing educators, and convince them that better schools are possible. Rhetorically, the narrative vignettes in these works serve an important purpose: they provide the reader with the jolt of hope she needs to begin to plan for the realization of the proposed improvement in her own school world.

Zmuda, Kuklis and Kline (2004) are forthright about this intent: "We have chosen to illuminate…operating principles through the context of a fictional school….The purpose of our narrative...is to….invite and encourage readers to apply the questions to and shape them from their own settings" (p. 3). I suspect that the other writers cited here would express similar hopes that the scenarios they present would engage and inspire readers to begin the work of proposed change. Indeed, if this is not the desired result, why write a school improvement book in the first place?

Professional Learning Utopia?

Tyack & Cuban's (1995) history of American school reform supports educators' enduring tendencies to utopianism, and the analysis of the works I chose is, I believe, fairly representative of this tendency in the rhetoric of school improvement literature. What I hope I have sufficiently demonstrated is that, beneath the pragmatic emphasis of practitioner-oriented school improvement literature, is a utopian subtext that calls upon readers to dream dreams of school improvement initiatives that result in ideal schools, freed once and for all of structural defects, and perennial plagues. I consider the professional learning community an important subgenre of this discourse because it shares surprising and numerous commonalities with utopian representations. Thus the PLC model may be considered doubly impactful for its rhetorical presentation in school improvement literature and for its content, which represents schools as utopian communities realized.

Justice and happiness for all…

The professional learning community is first utopian in its preoccupation with the political economy of schools. Like intentionally-designed utopian societies, the intentional professional learning community maps out what are deemed to be just distributions of power and resources. In turn, these distributions guarantee satisfaction and fulfillment for participants. For example, a key concept in the professional learning community is the decentralization of power (Lambert, 2003; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Zmuda, Kuklis & Kline, 2004). Via distributed leadership, the school not only runs more effectively, but generates a utopian sort of happiness for staff. If we revisit the vignettes above, we find staff that "emerge" from the professional development activities – as if reborn; they are "enthusiastic," "optimistic," "thoughtful," "skilled," and "innovative." The activities of staff are cooperative, and guided by a collective vision. Thus full participation in the community promises personal and professional fulfillment.

PLC models also emphasize sharing in the form of just distributions of resources. Tapping a tendency to equate utopian societies with socialism and collective ownership (Jameson, 2004), the professional learning community, according to McLaughlin & Talbert (2006) generates "a forum in which everyone can use this 'knowledge property'" (p. 6). In collaborative professional development models, teachers' learning and expertise are common property. Teachers' responsibilities and powers reflect fair distributions of both the daily labour of teaching in a school and the fruits of that labour in the form of enhanced professional skills and knowledge.

Existential problematics...

Fairness and justice is only easily achieved when it presumes absolute equality of persons (Clark, 2006). Thus the professional learning community model also reflects a utopian tendency to homogenization (Jameson, 2004). The works upon which I have focused offer a consistently-stated recognition that staff have differing strengths and agendas, and that students have differing needs and abilities. But, because these differences cannot be treated with any significant depth in the texts, they are subsumed by the egalitarian hopefulness inherent in the PLC. For example, faith in "collective capacity," (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006), "leadership capacity" (Lambert, 2003), or the "every-teacher-a-leader model" (Gordon, 2004) assume that all individuals are equally willing and able to assume "leadership." The only way this works is if we cast such a wide net in our definition of leadership activities that the concept of leadership itself becomes amorphous and ineffectual.

A similar dynamic may be observed in the PLC's emphasis on "student achievement" or "student learning" (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Gordon, 2004; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Zmuda Kuklis & Klein, 2004). Again, while it is stated in all cases that students have different abilities and needs, the complexities of meeting these needs tend to be swept away by the inspirational rhetoric of school "visions" or "mission statements" (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Homogenization is also an inevitable result of efforts to standardize curricula and assessment practices – activities that are promoted as effective uses of teachers' collaborative time (Dufour, Eaker & Dufour, 2005; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Zmuda, Kuklis & Kline, 2004).

According to Jameson (2004), utopian citizens are presented in a mode of "anthropological otherness, which never tempts us for one minute to try to imagine ourselves in their place, to project the utopian individual with concrete existential density" (p. 39). In other words, like the heroines in our school improvement vignettes, the utopian teacher or the utopian student is a flat character, representing a whole; or, as Jameson states it, s/he is "depersonalized," – a member of a statistical population (p. 39). Thus, despite recognition in school improvement literature of diversity, such claims can only be subsumed by utopian representations. In this, the professional learning community is subject to the same conundrum inherent in all utopian social arrangements: the seeming necessity of "sameness" to keep the thing "fair" and in smooth working order, alongside the recognition that such homogeneity is neither possible nor wholly desirable.

Closely related to the paradoxical problem of homogeneity is the non-existence of utopia in time and space. Like More's original *Utopia*, fused literally from the Greek *ou topis* (not place) and *eu topis* (good place) (Anderson, 2006), the professional learning community model may be interpreted as a perfect place, and no place. As Halpin (2003) and Sargent (2006) note, such ahistorical and imaginative representations do permit a form of critical distancing; in this sense, the non-existent utopia is a mirror we may hold up to reflect on our present state of affairs.

However, with this otherworldliness come the traps for which utopian thinking has been consistently derided (Halpin, 2003; Lancaster, 2000; Sargent, 2006, Villora, 2006): that is, one meets either the wishful impotence or hazardous over-simplifications that seem almost inevitable outcomes of locating utopian impulses as real-world experiments. I believe that the professional learning community model, applied uncritically in this fashion, may create unrealistic expectations that in turn sow the seeds of a learning community's failure. I turn again to interpreting PLC literature to validate this idea.

First, exemplary professional learning models are "no place." While many of the vignettes I examined had their roots in actual case studies, for the purposes of scaling up the model, the PLC must be represented as universally as possible. As writers qualified their work with the recognition of diversity in persons; they have also cautioned that real professional learning communities are diverse and highly contextualized. Yet again, the delimitation of the professional learning community to an abstract model requires that it be represented precisely as "no place." Like the isolation of More's island *Utopia* from the rest of the world, schools with successful PLCs are portrayed in isolation from their larger environments. The tendency in virtually all works to hold the professional learning community to the level of the school site is especially significant here, for it permits the PLC model to be shielded from the great buffeting forces of districts and other larger governing bodies: politics, policy, funding, and mandates from on high.

In a related manner, the PLC model is located in "no time." This is particularly apparent in that in the professional learning community, inquiry, learning and improvement are "continuous," (Gordon, 2004; Zmuda, Kuklis & Klein, 2004) suggesting that there is no ebb and flow in how the school, its students and its staff fair; nor do external forces significantly impact the vision or workings of these. The notion of continuity is interesting, for it creates an abstraction of success: the school's "vision" is a carrot on a stick, a ceaseless march of progress. This image has both positive and negative implications. To the positive, it is a utopian land of plenty, a fountain of eternal life. In continuity lies unyielding hope. As Zmuda, Kuklis & Klein (2004) conclude, "The beauty of continuous improvement is that it never stops, for envisioning the possibilities never ends" (p. 181). Yet continuous improvement also denies an important paradox: a system must perpetually produce changes, yet somehow maintain stasis or consistent progress even as such changes feed back into the system. The utopian ideal of "continuous improvement" requires that a professional learning community be removed from finite, historical time and – speaking most existentially – from the inevitability of decline and death.

Summarily, it seems to me that the professional learning community model in many ways holds out the utopian dream that, through sheer force of human will and desire, the world can be made fair. All voices will be heard, all school staff will be empowered, and all students will achieve. With enough effort and commitment on the part of school staff, the school can diminish or even in theory eradicate the inequalities and sufferings of its students: these which teachers cannot help but take personally at times, and carry home with them as specters of failure. Utopia is a "happy" place – a place where everyone – as in More's original *Utopia* – is productive, creative, and fulfilled (Jameson, 2004). Given "continuous improvement," there is no degeneration, no entropy. Micro-politics and power struggles among school staff, among schools and districts, are things of the past, because the power of a common purpose unites all. Is it any wonder that the professional learning community model is, for many educators, such a source of hope?

Ideology, Utopia, and the Professional Learning Community

Of all the ways a professional learning community may parallel a utopian world, the dimension of radicalism, for me, is most "suspect" and hence most worthy of closer scrutiny. Utopian thought can propose radical alternatives to the way we do things now; similarly, the PLC is lauded for its potentially "transformative" impact on professional development, staff relationships, and student learning (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Retallick, 1999; Zmuda, Kuklis & Kline, 2004). I have noted that many authors – and many educators in the field – place a great deal of faith in the professional learning community to fulfill multiple, critical emancipatory dimensions.

But, does the PLC really represent a radical alternative to the stubborn grammar (Tyack & Cubin, 1995) of public education? I must approach this question in my promised spirit of "critical hopefulness." Kellner (1998) articulates this position in his explication of Ernst Bloch's critical hermeneutic approach to utopian thought. Kellner believes that Bloch's theory of hope transcends Marxist and post-Marxist tendencies to limit ideology critique to deconstructing the interests of capitalism and its beneficiaries, and/or lauding socialist alternatives: "For Bloch," states Kellner, "ideology is 'Janus-faced,' two-sided: it contains errors, mystifications, and techniques of manipulation and domination, but it also contains a utopian residue or surplus that can be used for social critique and to advance progressive politics" (p. 82) From this perspective, it is possible to examine the ideological strains of utopianism in professional learning communities without abandoning their potentially positive and instructive elements.

Sargent states that "every ideology contains a utopia," (2006, p.12), and the converse of this is also true. So, what does a utopian rendering of the professional learning community reveal about its ideological underpinnings? Does the PLC-as-utopia serve a radical critical function, or does it, as Villoro (2006) suggests of some utopianism, only serve to reinforce and legitimize existing ideologies? If so, what are these existing ideologies?

At first glance, the PLC appears to propose some radical transformations indeed. Oft-cited is the potential for the professional learning community to break down entrenched individualism and isolation in teaching practices (Dufour, Eaker & Dufour, 2005; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). The professional learning community is potentially radical in its replacement of hierarchy and "great person" leadership with distributed and democratic forms of leadership. Radical claims also take the form of an unprecedented focus on activities of direct benefit to student learning. Unlike some collaborative management models that have focused on administrative and management functions (Cibulka & Nakayama, 2000), the PLC is explicitly and exclusively focused on professional development that makes teachers better teachers. Pressing at the gates but not (yet) on the track is a potentially radical re-ordering of time and space in schools, as recognition grows that collaborative time for teachers must be built into the school day in sufficient quantities if it is to be at all effective (Harris, 2003).

What remains to be seen is whether these radical proposals take root. AISI experiences suggest that meso-level politics, policy, and funding decisions play a significant role in limiting the degree of autonomy a school is afforded in shaping the contents and practices of its learning community. To date, the professional learning community has not had a broad impact on the routines and schedules of schools. The PLC model also does little to challenge the hierarchical relationships between teachers and students; students remain largely the objects – the recipients – of teachers' improvement efforts. Nor does collaborative professional development appear to have quelled school micro-politics (Leonard & Leonard, 2005), or bridged the great divide between administrators and teachers. Anecdotes from AISI projects suggest that "mandated" collaboration may even exacerbate staff tensions and power struggles.

Yet these are the failures and shortcomings of relatively radical practices, which cannot, I believe, be sustained without a parallel, radical shift in underlying ideology. It is in the failure to examine collaborative professional development models in light of their basic assumptions, beliefs, and values that sets them up for failure, or only limited success. For example, the vision that guides the professional learning community is presented as a product of democratic deliberation among a school's stakeholders, yet almost universally unacknowledged is the extent to which key aspects of any guiding vision are predetermined by neo-liberal government policies that position education as a vocational, rather than humanizing project (Apple, 2000; Bottery, 2000). While visions and missions may be idiosyncratically worded and adjusted for local conditions, they are, as conceived by Tyack and Cuban (1995), illusory activities that "tinker" within an ideological die that is already cast. As they stand, professional learning communities are claimed to "empower" teachers, yet in practice provide neither the tools nor the power for teachers to question the guiding assumptions of system of which they are a part.

Given these failures to date and the power of the ideology that contributes to them, do we have any reason to be optimistic about professional learning communities? Can the utopian qualities of the PLC be redeemed and translated into practices that make better schools? In a previous chapter on constructs of professionalism in professional learning communities, I have argued that the ideological underpinnings of collaborative learning models remain "up for grabs." It is up to educators, collectively, to determine whether the collaborative professional development will reinforce existing instrumentalism and managerialism in schools (Bottery, 2000) or draw upon its utopian promise of schools that are democratic, creative, supportive and progressive centres of learning for teachers and students alike.

I agree with Halpin (2003) that schools need the imagination and optimism that utopian dreaming affords – the ability to envision new ways of being schools that are tempered by a degree of reflexivity, and are wary of potentially totalizing or essentializing tendencies. However, I also concur with Levitas' (2004) assertion that

Halpin, in the end, goes too far in trying to achieve "utopian realism." She critiques Halpin's work as "itself a utopian project, whose failure reveals the limits placed on imagination by historical and institutional contexts" (p. 269). Essentially, she argues that Halpin is unsuccessful in his efforts to merge utopian visionary work with a pragmatic approach to administration and staff development.

Levitas' (2004) observation that Halpin's utopian imagination is limited by "historical and institutional contexts" is significant. It reflects, in my opinion, the limits of the sort of imaginative work that we see in school improvement literature. From this perspective, the narratives sampled for in this chapter fail to live up to their utopian promise, because they do nothing to transcend education's current climate. And, this is not a climate that supports the dreams of progressive educators. PLCs – as critics like Hargreaves (2003) and Bottery (2000) point out – draw their raison d'etre from a highly regulated focus on student "achievement" (defined by standardized test scores), and an emphasis on skill development for nationalist jockeying in a global race of capitalism.

However, these emphases need not prevent educators – the readers and thinkers who seek to put the represented professional learning communities into practice – from pursuing their own transformative discourses. I maintain my belief that collaborative professional development models represent a genuine opportunity for teachers to recreate themselves and their schools. To do so, however, requires both the insights afforded by critical pedagogy, and the "vocabulary of hope" that Halpin (2003) seeks to cultivate with utopian imagination. Without these tools, I expect that professional learning communities are at best pale shadows of the utopian collaborative climates described in school improvement literature.

Conclusion

Whether or not the professional learning community model "works" has not been a focus of my study. I leave this important question to researchers and educators who can bring the insights of field work to bear on the feasibility of PLCs. Strategies and their evaluations can, however, be reduced to soulless technologies if we divorce what we are doing from why, ultimately, we are doing it. My work has been an effort to examine the "why."

It is my hope that this thesis has offered a productive and multifaceted critique of the professional learning community model. I have tried, consistently, to offer this critique in the form of an invitation to school teachers and administrators to move beyond the rhetoric of practitioner-oriented PLC literature – well intentioned as it is – and take up the task of building learning communities that are authentically "grass roots" in that participants generate their own knowledge; independently evaluate the expertise provided by outsiders; and think critically about the ideological contexts within which they are asked to do their work. I hope that, in some small way, my study contributes to a conception of a professional learning community that complements an ongoing and sincere commitment to learning through the improvement of practical skills with an equal commitment to ongoing examination of the ends – not simply the means – of education.

I conclude sharing Halpin's hope that we may find ways to build utopian imagination into the daily work of schools (2003). What remains to be seen is whether collaborative professional development models can further this objective. In the meantime, I continue to honour the persistence and passion of many of the teachers and administrators I have been privileged to work with, and long to see more of the sorts of professional development opportunities in our schools that give greater rein to their professional commitments to their students and their own learning.

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